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**Saints, Stones and Stories:  
Modern Discourses in the Heritage Interpretation of the  
Christianity of Northumbria's Golden Age**

**Ian R Colson**

**Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Archaeology  
Durham University  
2025**

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	vi
<b>List of Figures</b>	vii
<b>List of Tables</b>	vii
<b>Abbreviations</b>	viii
<b>Abstract</b>	ix
 <b>Introduction</b>	
a. The Research Question	1
b. The Parameters of Study	5
 <b>Chapter 1: Backgrounds: Christianity, Northumbria, Archaeology and Heritage.</b>	
a. Archaeology, Heritage and Religion	6
1. Archaeology and Medieval Religion	6
2. Archaeology and Heritage Studies	9
3. Re-engaging Archaeology and Medieval Religion	13
4. The Material Study of Religion	14
5. Heritage and Religion	18
6. Heritage Interpretation and Religion	19
7. Communities and Heritage	25
8. Relevance of Heritage Theory to this Study	27
b. Issues in the Study of Christian Northumbria	28
1. The Process of Conversion	29
a. Sub-Roman Christianity	29
b. The Conversion of Northumbria	31
c. The Materiality of Conversion	32
2. The Monasteries	34
a. Identification and Excavation	34
b. The Spatial Arrangement of Monasteries	36
c. Life in the Monasteries	37
3. Christian Materialities	40
a. Worked Stone	40
b. Devotional Artefacts	41
c. Books	42

4. Prayer Spirituality and Lived Belief	44
 <b>Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods</b>	 50
a. Introduction	50
b. Methodology	51
c. Research Programme	53
d. Selection of Case Study Sites	53
e. Research Methods	56
1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis	56
2. Interviews	60
3. Autoethnography	61
f. Biographical Note	63
f. Validity and Reliability	64
g. Ethical Considerations	64
 <b>Chapter 3: The Case Study Sites</b>	 66
a. Introduction	66
b. Durham Cathedral	
1. Background	67
2. Interpretation	69
c. Jarrow	
1. Background	70
2. Archaeology	74
3. Interpretation	75
d. Lindisfarne	
1. Background	76
2. Archaeology	78
3. Interpretation	81
e. The National Museum of Scotland	81
f. Whitby Abbey	
1. Background	83
2. Archaeology	85
3. Interpretation	87
g. Whithorn	
1. Background	88
2. Archaeology	90
3. Interpretation	91



<b>Chapter 4: Interpreting Belief</b>	<b>93</b>
a. Introduction	93
b. Scene Setting: The Habitus of Professionals	
1. Professionals	94
2. The Professional World View	97
3. The Professional Conception of Audience	100
4. Professional Expertise	105
5. Professionals and Communities	108
6. Professional Perceptions of Religious Capitals	112
c. The Practice of Interpretation	
1. Interpretation Observed	115
2. Interpretation Practiced	122
3. Interpretation Subjectified	126
4. Interpretation Resisted	129
5. Interpretation Diffused	131
6. Interpretation Appropriated	133
d. Interpretative Authenticity	
1. Material Authenticity	135
2. Spiritual Authenticity	146
e. Christianity Problematised	149
f. Chapter Conclusions	153
 <b>Chapter 5: Interpreting the Northumbrian Church</b>	 <b>155</b>
a. Introduction	155
b. The Expansion of Christianity	
1. British, Irish and Roman Christianity	156
2. The Conversion of Elites	164
c. The Monasteries	
1. Minsters	167
2. Monastic Buildings	168
3. Interpretation and Research	173
d. The Place of the Church in Society	
1. The Church and Social Stratification	175
2. The Church as an Agent of Social Control	180
3. Learning and Literacy	181

e. Wider Connections	
1. Northumbria in a European Context	184
2. The Synod of Whitby	188
f. Postscript – the End of the ‘Golden Age’	189
g. Chapter Conclusions	195
 <b>Chapter 6: Northumbrian Belief</b>	
a. Introduction	196
b. Holy People and Relics	
1. Everyday Miracles	198
2. Magic and Relics	203
c. The Practice of Belief	
1. Touching the Divine	208
2. Entrusting to the Divine	215
3. Worked Stone	222
e. Chapter Conclusions	228
 <b>Chapter 7: Northumbrian Christianity and Modern Identity</b>	
a. Introduction	230
b. Heritage, Social Value and Identity	
1. Identity in the North of England	234
2. Scottish Identity	237
3. Identity Lost	242
c. Religious and Spiritual Identities	
1. The Relics of St Cuthbert – Identity Given and Received	245
2. Pilgrimage and Identity	259
d. Chapter Conclusions	264
 <b>Chapter 8: Future Directions for the Interpretation of Belief</b>	266
 <b>Chapter 9: Conclusions</b>	275

<b>References</b>	283
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## **Appendix 1**

a. Consent Form	326
b. Participant Information Sheet	327
c. Privacy Notice	329
d. Post-Interview De-Briefing Sheet	332

## **Appendix 2**

a. Phase One Interview Schedule	333
b. Indicative Phase Two Question Schedule	334

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## List of Figures

2.1 Programme of Research	51
2.2 The Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process	59
4.1 Dracula at Whitby Abbey Visitor Centre	103
4.2 Natural Light and Shadow, Whithorn Priory Museum	121
4.3 Worked Stone behind Glass, Kirkmadrine	122
4.4 A Spiritual Place, Whitby Abbey	128
4.5 Crossheads on Pillars, Durham	140
4.6 Crosshead fragments, Lindisfarne	141
4.7 Worked Stone, Whithorn Priory Museum	142
4.8 Closed Replica of the <i>Codex Amatinus</i> , Jarrow Hall	146
4.9 Advertisement for Beltane Celebrations, Jarrow Hall	148
4.10 Memorial for St Cuthbert, Lindisfarne	152
5.1 Wall Lines, Jarrow	171
5.2 Orientation Plan, Jarrow	172
5.3 Plain Cross in the Chelles Style, Whitby Abbey	186
5.4 Viking Raider Stone (1), Lindisfarne	190
5.5 Viking Raider Stone (2), Lindisfarne	191
5.6 9 <sup>th</sup> Century Spearhead, Lindisfarne	193
6.1 Display Case, Lindisfarne	209
6.2 Sign, Lindisfarne Priory	211
6.3 St Cuthbert's Comb, Durham	213
6.4 Detail of the Face of St Cuthbert, Ruthwell	214
6.5 Name Stones, Lindisfarne	216
6.6 Graphic of the Bewcastle Cross, Bewcastle	226
7.1 St Cuthbert's Coffin, Durham	246
7.2 Vestments from St Cuthbert's Coffin, Durham	247
7.3 St Cuthbert's Pectoral Cross, Durham	248
7.4 Abbadia Reliquary, Jarrow Hall	255

## List of Tables

2.1 Case Study Sites	55
4.1 Role Descriptions and Professional Disciplines of Interviewees	96
7.1 Modern Pilgrimage Paths	261

## **Abbreviations**

**AHD** Authorised Heritage Discourse

**EH** Bede: The Ecclesiastical History of the English people

**HAA** Anonymous: The History of Abbot Ceolfrith

**HAB** Bede: The History of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow

**HCD** Symeon of Durham: A History of the Church of Durham

**HLF** Heritage Lottery Fund

**NRSV** New Revised Standard Version (of the Bible)

**UNESCO** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

## Abstract

The Christianity of Northumbria's Golden Age is a source of enduring academic interest. The literature of its Anglian people continues to engage researchers while the wealth of material evidence increases year on year through excavation, research and other discoveries. The disassociation of modern British society with Christian belief is, however, well observed and visitors to those heritage places which relate the Northumbrian story may be increasingly unlikely to have a familiarity with the practice of Christianity nor an empathy with the world view of believers. This is despite the widespread societal use of Christian tropes, metaphors and imagery, not least those of early medieval Northumbria in the North East of England.

The aim of this research is to examine the discourses which surround the interpretation of Christian Northumbria in heritage settings. Its objectives are to evaluate whether the interpretation of Anglian belief should be seen as a distinctive field, to attempt a characterisation of the relationship between developing archaeological and historical theory and interpretative outputs and to investigate the uses of the heritage of early medieval Christianity in the creation of modern identity. The methodology is primarily ethnographic and, following an initial investigation of the issues in the heritage presentation of early medieval belief, centres on field work in six case study sites conducted between 2022 and 2024 where the interviewing of heritage professionals was informed by an autoethnographic observation of interpretative schemes and the analysis of supporting material. Critical realist perspectives are used to theorise and scaffold the research.

The results suggest that much of the interpretative discourse surrounding early medieval belief is didactic and emphasises traditional and received narratives over revisionist themes. Interpretations are necessarily limited by the mediums through which they are transmitted and, in avoiding complex ideations, tend to reinforce essentialisms while privileging artistic and aesthetic meanings over religious understandings. Heritage professionals suggest diminishing audience religious capitals which indicates a need to review models of visitor engagement. The use of the early medieval in the creation of identity is shown to differ between Scotland and England, although much of evidence for its role in identic discourse is anecdotal.

This study brings together archaeological, museological and heritage perspectives to theorise the development of the practice of the interpretation of early medieval belief using six case study exemplars. It points towards a need for the re-evaluation of approaches towards Northumbrian Christianity and further develops some of the conceptual pathways which are currently deployed. It invites the exploration of future directions in the interpretation of the beliefs of the Golden Age through targeted empirical visitor research and the utilisation of pedagogic models to enable audiences to more fully create authentic meanings.





## INTRODUCTION

### a. The Research Question

Visits to the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh were striking moments in this research. The museum was often ‘humming’ - filled with people who were engaged with the displays and interpretations which had been crafted for them. Large groups were gathered around the interactive exhibits in the Technology and Design galleries while other areas such as the natural history collections were equally busy. All this was in some contrast to the Early People gallery, located on Level -1, where it was often possible to be alone with some of the most significant and defining artefacts from early medieval Scotland, many of which directly referenced the Christian cultures from which they had come. The reasons for this disparity were far from certain. Was the lack of visitors due to the geography of the building or was there something more fundamental at play? Was the interactive interpretation of things as varied as computers, taxidermy and racing cars in the upstairs galleries indicative of a different understanding of materiality to the Northumbrian worked stone and metal work below? Were different audiences conceptualised, one looking for a kinaesthetic interaction and another more concerned with narrative? Did this speak to perceptions of the relevance and accessibility of the objects displayed? Though they emerged from different contexts, at other sites the questions were similar. At Whitby Abbey, for instance, the site of the early medieval monastery was modestly indicated yet overlaid with an eye-catching interpretation celebrating the Abbey’s fictional place in the novel *Dracula*; in Durham Cathedral worshippers freely knelt around St Cuthbert’s tomb and sang in Latin as apparently bewildered school children walked by; at the Whithorn Priory Museum hushed visitors hesitantly reached out and traced the interlacing on cross shafts with their fingers. The thread between these places was early medieval belief, but were there any common themes behind the construction of these modern encounters?

The research question that underpins this work is to ask what social influences have helped bring about the forms of interpretation that have been created around 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century

Northumbrian Christianity and which are offered to modern audiences. The research aim is thus to investigate the discourses which underlie these interpretations. This is approached primarily through the lens of materiality and so is situated largely within archaeological discourse. The research is grounded in the conviction that an engagement with heritage is an important component in human flourishing and that if this is lacking both individuals and societies are diminished (Smith 2006 & 2021; Australia ICOMOS 2013). Heritage is, however, a mutable, politicised and contested concept (Harrison 2013) and so this investigation attempts to locate heritage discourses within such entanglements and tries to describe their relationship with resultant interpretative schemes, applying insights from critical realist heritage studies (Smith 2006) as a scaffold. The hope is that what emerges will contribute to the theorisation and development of the practice of the interpretation of the Christianity of the early medieval world and the beliefs which it held.

The research aim is realised through three objectives which were developed and refined during the reflexive process of data collection and analysis: the investigation of the interpretation of early medieval Christianity as a necessarily distinct field, the observation of the influence of archaeological and other models of the Northumbrian Church on interpretative practice and theory and the development of an understanding of the contribution of heritage practice in the creation of social values and identities. Whilst distinct, these objectives are themselves subject to considerable entanglement.

The investigation of whether religion is regarded as a distinct field within interpretation, and if so whether it generates its own opportunities and challenges, forms the first objective. This is brought about by the observation of a disassociation of societal discourse in Britain, and the West more generally, from an inherited Christianised past in favour of more secular outlooks (Taylor 2007; Holland 2019). This movement is accompanied by a lessening familiarity with the beliefs and practices of Christianity and the development of highly individualistic spiritualities and worldviews (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The combined inference of these two factors is that the assumptions of previous generations of heritage professionals, namely an audience with a degree of pre-existent knowledge of Christian concepts and some degree of empathy with religious viewpoints, no longer has the same validity in modern discourse. If religious belief is conceived as being in some way distinctive

within heritage settings, then this invites the question of how this is addressed. If not, then this might suggest that the changing place of belief in society is overplayed. Equally, it may be that this is a null question for heritage institutions, perhaps because the organisations themselves are so firmly located in the society which they serve that they share these changing attitudes and values. This might indicate a lack of awareness of, or even apathy towards, religious themes and an incongruity between the presentation of the lived faith of the past and more modern outlooks. It might also point towards institutional uses of researched, or hypothesised, visitor demographics and a response to an understanding of audience need and preference.

The second objective explores the relationship between academic developments in the understanding of early medieval belief and its presentation in interpretative schemes. The Victorian mythologization of the early medieval in support of a burgeoning imperialist and Protestant identity (Melman 1991; Hawkes 2020) remains a cultural meme while, more recently, the 20<sup>th</sup> century ‘Celtic revival’ in British Christianity (Bradley 1999 & 2018) continues to facilitate a popular narrative of an eco-centric and non-hierarchical ecclesiology. The Northumbrian church also features prominently as a theme in modern written and visual media, for example the popular streamed television series *Vikings* (2013 – 2020) which counts a fictional Lindisfarne monk amongst its main protagonists. Archaeology and its related disciplines speak directly into such portrayals and provide insights which may challenge the cultural apprehensions which are informed by such sources. The degree to which such archaeological narratives are present in interpretative schemes is therefore of considerable interest, not just because of this contestation but also in the ways that complex arguments can be presented for more general audiences in necessarily abbreviated forms. The observation of such forms indicates the factors controlling interpretative schemes and allows consideration as to whether there are discernible strategies in the presentation of early medieval belief.

The third objective concerns the investigation of expressions of identity and social value within interpretative and heritage discourses and the degrees to which the presentation of early medieval belief engages with them or is employed in their support. This objective is located in the claims of heritage having a discernible role in human flourishing and wellbeing

(Smith 2021) through the creation of identity (Hobsbawm 1983; McDowell 2008). It includes the investigation of discourses which reflect concepts of ownership, claims over the legitimisation of authenticity, and the relationship between localised associations and a wider tourism (Waterton and Smith 2010; Isnart and Cerezales 2020; Timoney 2020). A further dimension is the interaction of the early medieval with modern religious identities and whether there is any conceptualisation of responsibilities, or ‘duties’ (Paine 2013), towards contemporary Christian groups which might claim some spiritual antecedence from the Northumbrian Church and, if so, what form these might take.

Although not a formalised objective, a recurrent theme that emerged in the reflexive process concerned potential future directions of interpretative schemes. A variety of interpretative approaches were observed and the consideration of the nature of the discourses behind them invited continued reflection as the research progressed. This was informed by observation, such as that in the National Museum which began this introduction, where it seemed that ‘enchantment, wonder and rapture’ (Staiff 2014, 160) could certainly happen in heritage settings but often appeared of a different order in the context of the interpretation of early medieval belief. The reflexive process frequently returned to the question of why this was and whether different forms of interpretation could, or should, be employed.

With this aim and its supporting objectives this study attempts to contribute to wider heritage debates, and particularly, those concerning the place of the early medieval Northumbrian religious past in modern heritage discourses. It not infrequently reflects on the constraints which bind heritage professionals as they interpret Northumbrian belief and, not unlike them, is itself bound by space and word counts. This study draws heavily from the interrelated, though distinct, disciplines of archaeology, museology and heritage studies. Each of these have developed discourses located in theory, practice and ongoing research. Therefore, too often this work must condense and, perhaps, over-simplify complex and nuanced concepts and debates. Nonetheless, it is hoped that it provides some insight into an intriguing, entangled and fascinating area of study.

## **b. Parameters of Study**

The title of this research references the ‘Northumbria’s Golden Age’ and this provides both the geographical and temporal parameters in which it is located. While there is of necessity a certain fluidity of definition, in this study it is broadly conceived as aligning with the period which begins with the conversions of the early to mid 7<sup>th</sup> century through to the destabilisation brought about by Viking incursions at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Hawkes 1996). It is typified as being a period of relative political stability where, if not under direct rule, the highwater of Northumbrian influence stretched from below the Humber in the south to the Firth of Forth in the north and from the east to the west coasts (Hawkes 1996, 9). The epitaph of ‘golden’ comes not least from the remarkable outpouring of dynamic artistic expression from this period that survives to the present day, epitomised by artefacts such as the Franks Casket,<sup>1</sup> Cuthbert’s carved wooden coffin<sup>2</sup> and the Lindisfarne Gospels.<sup>3</sup> This combination of geography and materiality allows the claim that this was a period of distinct and particular Northumbrian identity (Cramp 1999, 10-11).

Central to this identity was the Church. In the years following the conversion, the evolving relationship between the Church, elites and wider Anglian society brought about new models of societal discourse that transcended tribal groupings (Urbańczyk 2003, 25) and enabled a heightened degree of social stability (Hawkes 1996, 63). In this ecclesiastically informed space, a material and intellectual flourishing could take place. This occurred not least through the concentration of resources, skills and learning found in the monasteries, which became the preferred Christian expression of kings (Blair 2005, 74) and facilitated, for instance, the work of the monk-scholar Bede (d.735) on whose work much of the modern understanding of the period relies.

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<sup>1</sup> London: British Museum, 1867,0120.1

<sup>2</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL:18.7.2

<sup>3</sup> London: British Library, Cotton MS Nero D IV

## **CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUNDS: CHRISTIANITY, NORTHUMBRIA, ARCHAEOLOGY AND HERITAGE**

This chapter first reviews themes found in literature emerging from archaeology and heritage studies and describes various approaches to the religious belief of the past. It suggests that religion has been conceptualised in an entangled relationship which has largely been informed by the internal discourses of the disciplines themselves. The chapter then moves on to consider elements of the modern understanding of the Northumbrian church, particularly those questions located in archaeological discourse around the processes of conversion, the place of the monasteries in early medieval society and the lived experience of Anglian Christians.

### **a. Archaeology, Heritage and Religion**

#### **1. Archaeology and Medieval Religion**

A critique offered from within its own internal discourse is that archaeology has tended to introduce a dichotomy between faith and everyday life in its consideration of medieval societies (Petts 2011; Thomas 2013; Gilchrist 2012 & 2020). The application of a post enlightenment Cartesian dualism and the binaries dividing the sacred and profane has created a distinct religious category which, while making religious themes more accessible to modern minds, distorts the experience of the past. These critiques suggest that medieval belief should be seen as not merely an adjunct to the internal rhythm of the lives of individuals and communities but rather part of an undifferentiated whole. In the portrayal of early medieval societies, any separation of the spiritual and secular becomes a modern overlay on a worldview where the conviction of a symbiosis between the spiritual and the material is attested to by the prevalence of magical and apotropaic belief (Blair 2005, 167-180; Yorke 2006, 248-256), accompanied by the veneration of the heroic (Mayr-Harting 1999, 220-229; Yorke 2006, 108-109) and an enduring eschatological fascination (Boenig 2000, 29-36). To

suggest that religion stood outside of these cultural values as some form of separate discourse is to distort the lived experience of the past. The transcendent did not have to maintain its presence in the public square, it was part of the fabric of the square itself.

David Petts (2011, 30) points to an archaeological overreliance on a simplistic dualism brought about from the use of a taxonomy of ‘local’ and ‘world’ religions, concepts which have their roots in colonialist influenced discourse evident, for instance, in the enduring work of Emile Durkheim (Allen and O’Boyle 2017). This overreliance leads to an essentialist perspective, that is the necessity of the presence of various essential characteristics for the observer to award legitimacy to belief systems. Local religion might receive epitaphs which suggest that it is underdeveloped or naïve whilst world religions are privileged and promoted as having greater coherence and hence value. The charge that local religion is primitive and less developed rests largely on the contention that it demonstrates a lesser lucidity than world religion, an axiom which is at best speculative and at worst erroneous (Swenson 2015, 331; Johnson 2020, 191). The necessary acknowledgement that localised belief systems may in fact be highly sophisticated requires the abandonment of simplistic binaries (Brück 1999; Gilchrist 2020, 9), not least that of there being legitimising essential characteristics (Fogelin, 2007, 57; Petts 2011, 33). Such characteristics may be little more than a list of demonstrable features which are required to achieve some imposed classification and thus enable the authorisation of authenticity for an eternal taxonomy. Recognition that the need for essential characteristics is erroneous allows the deployment of other ways of conceptualising religion where intersecting identities - social, cultural, familial, religious - can be observed and theorised (Petts 2011, 35). With the abandonment of religious essentialism, archaeology can be more open to interpreting material evidence in ways which allow greater nuance and thus facilitate superior depth and complexity in interpretation.

The rejection of essentialism has a particular relevance in early medieval studies. On one level it demands the acknowledgement of the efficacy and vitality of indigenous Anglian belief systems and rejects characterisations of primitivism whilst eroding any claim of a religious monoculture. This receives support in Martin Carver’s proposal that Northumbrian society between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries should be conceived as consisting of ‘intellectual

communities' (Carver 2011 & 2019), a concept necessitated by the breadth and complexity evident in the archaeological record and in the literature of the period. Carver asks us to conceptualise geographically separated communities, connected physically - often by waterways and culturally by heritage and kin - which can fashion things and ideas within their own terms of reference whilst choosing what to take or leave from that which comes from outside. Later Northumbrian developments may have begun to introduce a heightened degree of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy but clear lines of evolutionary development towards a monolithic western Christendom (e.g. Mayr-Harting 1991) are almost certainly an oversimplification and do not reflect the evidence of the archaeological record (Carver 2019, 522-3). In the early years of the Golden Age, the categories of Christian and pagan are too crude to use as archaeological terms and would not have reflected the reality of lived experience (Carver 2012, 200)

Carver's work conceptualises Christianity as being fundamentally an expression of power: 'religion in the sense of an orthodox rule is only possible when there is sufficient power to exercise coercion and enforce conformity' (2012, 200). Such perspectives help inform the view that a secular, humanistic discourse based on Marxist theory is privileged in some archaeological theorisations (Swenson 2015, 330; Gilchrist 2020, 4-12). Here religion is concerned with 'structural mechanisms of social control that aim to maintain hegemonic power relations' (Gilchrist 2020, 8). As religion, under Marxist terms of reference, is ultimately ideologically false this privilege favours economic and sociological interpretations which subaltern, or even exclude, any authenticity in the spiritual. This may be demonstrated through a variety of standard texts which, whilst describing Christian materialities, focus on technological and economic meanings (e.g. Rodwell 2005; Aston 2006; Coppack 2006) whilst failing to develop spiritual perspectives (Gilchrist 2020, 8).

A significant related discourse is the inference that a bucolic Anglo-Saxon society, ennobled by a powerful localism and widespread equality, a world of mead, bards, legends and heroes, is gradually brought to ruin by the influence of a Christianity which was singularly concerned with the establishment of orthodoxy and orthopraxy (Carver 2011 & 2019, Madrell 2015). In this way Anglians move from 'Beowulf to bureaucracy' (Hindley 2006, xli) and the role of Christianity in the creation of the Golden Age is marginal if not obstructive. The adoption of



Christianity is an action of loss evidenced by disenfranchisement, not least that of women (Carver 2011, 192), and Christian mission is couched in terms of ‘fundamentalism’ (Carver 2019, 388). Of course, not all archaeologists share such perspectives. Rosemary Cramp (1999, 8) offers a gentle reminder that in a world with numerous existential threats, rather than being experienced as a source of oppression, religious belief may have brought comfort and hope.

## **2. Archaeology and Heritage Studies**

Roberta Gilchrist (2020, 1) suggests a lack of engagement by archaeologists with broader heritage discourses leading to an abdication of presence in debates around identity, conflict, cultural diversity and professional ethics. Laura Jane Smith, herself an archaeologist, uses Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2003) to locate these discourses:

The concept of discourse drawn on here derives from critical discourse analysis. As Norman Fairclough states, discourse is ‘a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning’. Discourses therefore make the world meaningful and intercede in the negotiation of social relationships and relations of power. Discourses of heritage, and not least the AHD [the Authorised Heritage Discourse], constitute and reflect a range of social practices that, amongst other things, are used to give meaning to group identity, historical narratives and collective and individual memories, and these in turn organize social relations and identities around nation, class, culture and ethnicity. (Smith 2012, 6)

Matthew Johnson (2020) suggests that, whilst North American archaeology aligns itself to anthropology, British archaeologists tend to look more towards the classics or history as sources of self-reference. This explains what he views as a fundamental difference in approach to theoretical questions which he claims results in an unfortunate lack of the adoption of models of design and interpretation in Britain. Conversely, British heritage and museum studies have embraced more anthropologically led theorisations and, together with much of the Anglophone world, have been profoundly influenced by the critical heritage

movement (Watson et al. 2019, 2). Critical heritage studies matures around questions of power relations, social justice, inclusion and accessibility whilst rejecting approaches that deny wider participation such as investing meaning purely in collections or expert interpretation.

That it may be claimed that archaeology has not engaged with more social questions of belonging and meaning may be considered surprising, not least to many archaeologists themselves. Much archaeological effort has been expended in expounding Gilchrist's questions of identity, diversity and conflict, sometimes with surprising results. Excavation of early medieval burials at the Anglian royal centre of Bamburgh, for instance, points to a movement of people between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries both within and without of Northumbria including individuals from Scandinavia (Groves 2010; Kirton and Young 2017). This is suggestive of links which speak directly into identities and serves to undermine a popular narrative of the 793 Viking raid on Lindisfarne being conducted by an entirely alien unknown. This is, however, not where Gilchrist's disconnect lies; rather it concerns the way in which such research is communicated and the subsequent utility it is judged to hold. The concern is not one of the knowledge that is created, rather how meanings are applied (Smith 2004). In many ways this can be summed up in the cautionary words of John Fritz and Ted Plog delivered over half a century ago:

We suspect that unless archaeologists find ways to make their research increasing relevant to the modern world, the modern world will find itself increasingly capable of getting along without archaeologists. (Fritz and Plog 1970, 412)

Gilchrist (2020, 110 -14) suggests that there is a tendency for some areas of archaeology to concentrate on the material and monumental to the detriment of the development of other meanings. Smith (2006 & 2012) offers a framework which may be used to interrogate such preferences through the theorisation of the existence of a dominant, western, Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD). The AHD should not be seen as some organised movement but rather a largely unconscious politicised professional expression of power which originates in

heritage organisations, the academy, and privileged societal groupings and is located at a national rather than local level. It demands wide support not least through the dictation of notions of belonging, taste and identity. The AHD privileges the monumental and tangible, promotes some meanings over others and authorises singular versions of history. It subalterns and subverts other discourses that may attempt to disrupt it, not least those that are located in the lives of those who sit on the periphery of societal power structures. However, it would be wrong to conceptualise the AHD as a purely reactionary force as authorisation can emerge from more progressive quarters. This is suggested, for instance, in the debates around the portrayal of the legacy of slavery within the portfolio of properties managed by the National Trust, where newer narratives pointing to a colonialist past have been contentious yet are now commonplace (Donington 2024).

In describing the AHD, Smith (2006) maintains that the relationship between knowledge and power is a defining factor. The AHD has at its root spokespersons who opine on legitimacy and who are represented as being ‘experts’ (Smith 2006, 29). The application of this expertise maps out what is, and is not, a legitimate interpretation and can be deployed to deprivilege elements which may attempt to challenge or disrupt the AHD. Once identified, authorised heritage must be cared for, protected and revered so that it can be passed on to future generations with a rationale located in the claim of the necessity of a shared common identity based on the past. It will privilege the experiences of social elites, and demand the allegiance of others, whilst shutting down and closing off other interpretations which emerge from outside of its immediate circle, acting in defence of its expertise. It will often be tightly bound to a site, object or building and will so dominate any discourse around it that those who visit or engage become passive consumers, rather than constructivist co-creators, of knowledge and meaning.

In this analysis archaeology as a discipline is claimed to often unwittingly embrace the AHD because it offers ‘authority, access to data, status as custodian of heritage and so forth’ (Smith, 2012, 22). Such characteristics dissuade archaeology from engaging with heritage studies because heritage is dynamic and mutable, a verb rather than a noun, a slippery concept concerned less with absolutes and more with processes of change. By its nature the conceptualisation of heritage is habitually contested (e.g. Wright 2009; Harrison 2013) and

therefore resistant to attempts of control or direction. In not engaging with the constructs of heritage analysis, some archaeologists may walk blindly into these contests unaware of their own agency (Smith 2012, 22). Moreover, by embracing the AHD, archaeology becomes theoretically self-limiting because the AHD is fundamentally discriminatory and protective of its own power and authority. As Smith goes on to note:

... any constraint on practice is a constraint on theoretical debate and development. If theory is practice and practice theory, then how we frame our practice will inevitably frame the way we think about and theorize what it is we do as archaeologists (Smith 2012, 22)

Smith identifies two distinct challenges to the pattern of the AHD. Firstly ‘subaltern discourses’ (2006, 35) compete with the AHD and are often concerned with community and wider participation in heritage management and interpretation (e.g. Watson 2007). These subversive discourses come about by the desire of communities to have greater inclusion and visibility in the way that the past is used (Weil 2007; Bunning, 2019) and are particularly disruptive when concerned with indigenous or First Nation peoples regaining a post-colonial voice (e.g. Watkins 2007). A primary target for such subversion is in the very construct of the concept of heritage itself which as a western, and modern (Wright 2009), notion is critiqued as having adopted colonialist models which have alienated and dismissed other cultures’ understanding of how and why the past confers identity (Smith 2020, 36). The effect of the AHD is to marginalise groups, obfuscate inequalities and reinforce a dominant discourse. In this context, relatively little attention has been given to those modern Christian groups or communities which claim early medieval Christianity as a source of identity. There are exceptions to this, such as in the work of Avril Maddrell (2015) on pilgrimage sites on the Isle of Man, but by and large there is little evidence that such voices are given parity to expert opinion.

A second challenge to the AHD is in the claim that it acts to support a nostalgia driven, backwards looking society where imagined certainties afford meaning and a sense of belonging, driven by an attendant touristic consumerism (Hewison 1987; Wright 2009). In this analysis the AHD affords a retreat for a mainly middle-class audience from the

uncertainties of a post-modern or post-structuralist multicultural society while disenfranchising other ethnic and social groupings (Smith 2006, 39). With the introduction of more progressive authorisations, however, discourses may longer be quite so nostalgic. A significant point of exertion for the AHD remains one of authenticity where it attempts to control interpretative discourse to dominate any narrative (2006, 41). Here, expert authority is deployed, largely sidestepping debates over what constitutes interpretative authenticity (e.g. Hewison 1987; Urry 1990; Watson 2019). This professionally led attribution of authenticity engenders support through popular perception (Watson 2019, 186), though this may become a significant potential point of subversion of the AHD.

Smith firmly rebuts criticism of the conceptualisation of the AHD and critical realist heritage studies more generally (Smith 2021). Such critiques coalesce around suggestions of relativity and whether an emphasis on heritage as a social construct denies meanings located in materiality (Harrison 2013, 112-113; Smith 2021, 21-37). Smith responds by reasserting the nature of critical realism, noting that it is not a theory in itself but rather a mechanism that allows the interrogation of theories, and that the AHD merely identifies the social and political contexts of heritage (Smith 2021, 22). It is therefore neither relativist nor constructivist but rather a diagnostic tool. Furthermore, the suggestion of the downplaying of materiality fails to appreciate the difference between the material having intrinsic value and it being valued (2021, 32). Such materialist critiques, which emerge from a post-human or new materialist perspective (Ahmed 2008), avoid structural issues and as such are as problematic as the post-modern constructivism that they seek to replace (Smith 2021, 34-35). Smith does, however, acknowledge that in assuming an emotional neutrality that emerges from the rationality of the expert voice, the theorisation of the AHD underplays the role of emotion in heritage discourses (2021, 50).

### **3. Re-engaging Archaeology and Medieval Religion**

In her analysis of the relationships between medieval archaeology, heritage and the sacred, Roberta Gilchrist identifies three fundamental strands around which cultural definitions can be developed, namely authenticity, continuity and timelessness (2020, 28). These link

directly to questions of heritage value where she views archaeology and spirituality to have become dislocated. Siân Jones (2017, 33) argues that while a well-developed and spiritually inclusive concept of social value is widely advocated in any number of national and international policies and protocols it is consistently marginalised by expert opinions which promote historical significance and promote the privileging of aesthetics. The result is that a heritage fixed immutably in the past collides with and subalterns a heritage situated mutably in the present (Smith and Natsuko 2009, 2). It is only when mutual recognition can be achieved that the historic environment can meaningfully be valued in such a way as to allow a dynamic response (Jones 2017, 33) which recognises the contingency of any interpretation.

Recognising the need for a differing notion of the value of religion in archaeological theorisation and interpretation, Gilchrist asks how a more meaningful engagement can be promoted (2020, 31). She acknowledges the place of archaeology in developing senses of timelessness and continuity in regard to sacred space but identifies inadequate considerations of human activity in shaping religious beliefs and practice (Gilchrist 2020, 31). One remedy that Gilchrist notes is to examine religion through practice theory with its attendant emphasis on agency and embodiment (Fogelin 2007, Petts 2011, Gilchrist 2012, Swenson 2015, Thomas et al 2017). ‘These approaches examine ritual as a *material process* and give priority to the active role of people using sacred space and material culture in contrast with secularist approaches that see religious participants as passive and controlled by elites’ (Gilchrist 2020, 31). This material approach resonates across current thinking in museum and heritage studies, particularly in relation to religion and religious artefacts (e.g. Paine 2013; Buggeln and Franco 2018; Morgan 2021).

#### **4. The Material Study of Religion**

Archaeology, heritage studies, museology and religious studies have all been profoundly impacted by the material turn (Dudley 2010, 2-5; 2012, 1-15; Hicks 2012; Gilchrist 2020, 1-2; Mohan and Warnier 2017; Morgan 2017, 117-118; 2021 1-23; 2022). In the context of religious materiality, things ‘are not mere signifiers of value but the very medium in which religions take shape’ (Morgan 2022). While there is considerable scope in how this turn may

be defined (Hazard 2013), the core concepts are in the legitimisation of meanings emerging from the material rather than materiality being simply a lens through which the intangible is conveyed. This approach emerges from the recognition of an underlying western discourse which has apprehended belief largely through scriptures and their reception by the individual (Lynch 2010; Morgan 2010; 2022). Here, a historic legacy of classical humanism, informed by a Protestant-derived intellectual inheritance (Meyer and Houtman 2012, 9 -13; Stridjdom 2014), rejected materiality and its associated sensory engagements without necessarily having an awareness of its own demonstrable materialities (e.g. Milner 2016, 209-210). These inclinations, often coupled with colonialist epistemologies, tended towards the denial of any legitimate agency in the material and scorned that which were variously seen as totems, idols and fetishes, forcing a nomenclature of ignorance on those whose ‘primitive’ religion sanctioned their use.

In practice, David Morgan describes the material approach as one that:

... examines whatever artifacts, bodies, substances, or environments do to produce and to maintain a web of relations that brings human beings to what really matters to them... This means investigating the webs of human and non-human agents acting on one another by describing their material linkages. The web or assemblages of things whose interaction constitutes a religious event consists of objects, from microbes to rocks to human beings, but also environments and all kind of substances – air, water, earth, fire, sunlight. (2021, 76).

It is in this way that things sit in time and space and are observed, touched, tasted and smelled; experienced in ways which can afford, or deny, a sense of place and belonging whilst conferring or withdrawing understanding and meaning (Plate 2015, 4-7). The material religion approach adopts these principles, although it is a broad field informed by different emphasises offering a variety of perspectives. Thus, human beings can become an interpretative lens, in that everything is seen, heard, touched or tasted (Verrips 2010), object theory may be applied where ‘it may be helpful not to think of sacred others as sacred objects or as sacred subjects, but as both objects and subjects’ (Lynch 2010, 51) and artefacts may be afforded biographies with layered meanings created through the agency of the language

employed in their description (Morgan 2021, 156). In this way a sacred artefact from Oceania may become in turn an idol, a trophy of missionary endeavour, a curiosity, an ethnographic specimen and ultimately come to be described in a contemporary museum as an aesthetic *object d'art* (2021, 156).

The material approach has come to overshadow the discipline known as comparative religious studies (Reinhardt 2016, 76) which, at its least developed, was often a simplistic comparison of belief and praxis which forced a Christian derived taxonomy onto other religious systems, often supported by a Husserlian derived phenomenology (Allen 2005). Scholarly critiques of such approaches have led to a lively contemporary debate over both the philosophy and, in educational contexts, pedagogies undergirding religious studies (Jackson 2004). The modern educational emphasis has become one of enabling meanings which highlight the interior world of the individual believer rather than overarching religious structures (Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education] 2021). This essentially narrative practice resonates with the material approach even though some strands of this latter methodology have themselves been accused of being a phenomenology in disguise (Hazard 2013, 63-64). Other criticisms of the material study of religion include the suggestion that insufficient attention may be given to unequal power relationships in the negotiation of religious objects (Stridjdom 2014) and the view that the role of transcendence in religion is necessary in the creation of meaning (Reinhardt 2016). This has led to the advocacy of the so called 'new materialism' in religious studies which centres around the rejection of the differentiation between subjects and structures:

New materialists do not presume the process of cultural production to be a dialectical negotiation between impersonal disciplinary structures on the one hand and human subjects on the other. In a new materialist view, there is no conceptual dichotomy between subjectivity and structure, for there are no subjects or structures as such. (Hazard, 2013, p. 68)

In the post-modern idiom, an emphasis on the material may be seen as being particularly attractive in that it facilitates the investigation of belief without the need to make judgments over the value of doctrinal statements and truth claims. While religious attitudes and



doctrines may be acknowledged, the principle point of investigation becomes the believer's engagement with the material. A perhaps surprising omission in the wider literature is, however, any contrary voice from religious constituencies who, it may be posited, would likely advocate that the material can only really be understood through a doctrinal lens; meaning is the result of defined belief not the creator of it. Although this tension may be acknowledged (e.g. Meyer and Houtman 2012) few scholars appear to consider that material investigative frameworks may feel like an academic or aesthetic appropriation of Christian religious themes, although the experience of some respondents recorded in Chapter Four is suggestive of it. Regardless, the material approach remains significant in academic discourse, not least in a museological context (Dudley 2010).

In the context of this research, the application of the approach facilitates a variety of new perspectives in the study of historic western Christianity not least in countering the influence of a lingering anti-Catholicism in the academies of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe and America (Drury 2001). This is particularly poignant for the study of early medieval Christianity with its emphasis on features later associated with the Catholic tradition including monasticism, penance, and intercession for the dead. It will be suggested in Chapter 6 that the surprise which accompanied some professionals' first encounter with the Anglian emphasis on these elements may at least in part be traced back to their subjugation by earlier generations of scholars.

These discussions around the material are not alien to archaeology in that, despite claims of a limited engagement with other disciplines, the material approach may be placed within the grand sweep of postprocessualism (Harris and Cipolla 2017; Johnson 2020). While some resolution of disputes around relativism has meant that the battle lines between processualists and postprocessualists have become less clear (Johnson 2020, 268), there are several specific criticisms that material theory must address (2020, 150-154). Perhaps the most fundamental of these is whether a materials approach can ever be fully meaningful if it abandons the social constructs from which the materials themselves emerge. This may be viewed to be paralleled by the commentary offered by the social anthropologist Tim Ingold who suggests that 'we need to focus on the processes first, and to realise that the material is perhaps better

understood as a verb rather than as a noun: ‘it’s a going on; it’s things happening’ (Ingold et al 2024, 121), a flow of ‘meshwork’ rather than a connected network (Ingold 2010, 11).

## 5. Heritage and Religion

The historian John Bossy identifies a pattern of the ‘migration of the holy’ (1985, 153) in western societies where the notion of the sacred is appropriated by secular powers and religious ritual annexed in service of civil authority. In this context sacrality is understood through the lens of the work of Emile Durkheim where it is not an ontological category but rather is concerned with social agreement to separate and protect from daily life (Durkheim 2016). The migratory process can be observed, for instance, in the employment of religious performance in the development of traditions around the coronation of English monarchs as a mechanism to promote a state hegemony (Hobsbawm 1983). It is, however, perhaps most evident in the context of heritage where secular discourse creates a religious ‘aura’ (Isnart and Cerezales 2020, 3) around inherited materialities: ‘architecture, paintings, sculptures, museum collections, or indeed any items western society described as cultural heritage seem to be a product of this migration of the holy principle’ (2020, 3). This may lead to contention when aesthetic meanings are privileged in the presentation of the materiality of the Christian past, a potential secular sacralisation, meet values which are located in living religious belief. Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales (2020, 4-5) explore this by considering Bourdieu’s reflections on images in a Florence church where a religious devotee and a cultural tourist are unable to share the same experience in front of images of saints. An image may be religiously active to the devotee who affords it spiritual significance, while the non-religious visitor responds to a secular consecration as a work of art. The devotee and the tourist are separated by background and cultural influence; they sit in different *milieu* and, as such, do not create the same meanings even when presented with the same image. While a comprehensible assertion, any generalisations of this sort must be able to accommodate the possibility that on other occasions the devotee may act as a tourist and the tourist a devotee, or possibly both at the same time. However, similar observations occur in the literature considering the desacralisation of religious heritage sites (e.g. Gutic et al 2010; Duda and Doburzyński 2019; Aulet and Duda 2020) especially where a weight of tourism means that religious functions are disrupted or subordinated.

Isnart and Cerezales (2020, 6) suggest that a narrative of the ebb of the tide of belief in the face of secular sacrality can be rejected in favour of a religio-secular paradigm where the relationship between religious heritage and secular heritage - the religious heritage complex - recognises ‘the *habitus* of the conservation of the past within religious traditions and a conscious *policy* regarding the care of the past in heritage contexts’ (2020, 6). This subverts any easy dualism between religious understandings and secular heritage values instead pointing to a process of negotiation and co-curation which embraces an ambivalence of meaning. In this way, the religious heritage complex becomes a tool to allow two different layers of values to co-exist in one theoretical construct.

There are several challenges in the theorisation of the religious heritage complex, not least in the implied essentialisms inherent in maintaining discrete religious and secular gazes.

However, the principle benefit it offers in this study is in the observation that religious and secular claims over heritage, in a Christian context at least, need not be adversarial. As Anna Niedźwiedź observes in her review of the volume in which the complex is introduced: ‘these statements are reflected in an approach which – instead of concentrating on differences and conflicts – explores convergences and collaborations. By adopting this perspective as a starting point, the contributors are able to discover non-obvious alliances between various social actors and combinations of both ‘religious’ and ‘heritage’ discourses’’ (2022, 255).

## **6. Heritage Interpretation and Religion**

The experience of visitors to heritage places is a focus for both scholarly and institutional research. Established methodologies (Nelson and Cohn 2015) enable developed understandings of audience experience which can then be used to inform both the fashioning of interpretative schemes (Macdonald 2001; Paddon 2009 & 2016) and their subsequent evaluation (Hein 1998, 100-101; Black, 2005, 211-223; Hooper-Greenhill 2007; Simon 2010). The entirety of visitors’ engagement with a heritage space, from the moment of entry to departure, is widely considered to be part of a performative process during which meaning

is constructed (Mosser 2010; Whitehead 2016) and thus becomes part of any interpretative intent. Much recent literature concerning interpretation is centred on praxis (e.g. Black 2005; Goulding 2009; Ham 2013) and this has attracted the claim that the theorisation of interpretative mechanisms remains undeveloped (Stern and Powell 2020 & 2021). This is surprising as interpretative practice continues attract broad academic interest (e.g. Mosser 2010; Staiff 2016) and continues to evolve through the application of theory, for instance in the multisensory engagement of the ‘sensory turn’ (Skeates and Day 2019; Luo, Doucé and Nys 2024). This unevenness is, perhaps, indicative of a maturing field where distinct national and disciplinary discourses around the form and performance of heritage impact on interpretative outcomes.

Interpretational mechanisms can be broadly taxonomized as being from either a didactic or a discovery approach (Mosser 2010; 29). Didacticism revolves around the presentation of information and has the general aim of offering visitors new understandings (Hein 1998, 25-29) while discovery learning accepts that learning ‘is an active process, that learners undergo changes as they learn, that they interact with the material to be learned more fundamentally than only absorbing it, that they somehow change the way their minds work as they learn’ (1998, 30). The didactic and discovery approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may form components of blended interpretative schemes.

A large proportion of Anglophone interpretative discourse is located in North America where the work of Freeman Tilden remains influential and, in the UK, has ‘guided excellence in the profession [of interpretation] for over 70 years now’ (Ryland 2025). A journalist by background, Tilden’s work was centred in the National Parks of the United States in the years following the Second World War. Critical of much of the interpretation he encountered he offered six principles of interpretation which, if observed, would result in it being ‘correctly directed’ (2007, 34). These principles demand that interpretation should be relatable, should be more than the passage of information, should be age specific and present a whole rather than a part. Interpreters are artists and their role is not to instruct but rather to ‘provoke’ (2007, 35). Provocation here is not antagonistic, rather the promotion of curiosity and the desire to understand more. These principles combine to enable the aim of interpretation which is the protection of heritage, both natural and historic: ‘through interpretation,

understanding, through understanding appreciation, through appreciation, protection' (2007, 65). Tilden's work may be judged to be of its time and has received sustained criticism over its applicability to a post-modern/ post-structuralist society (Harrison 2013; Silberman 2013). These critiques coalesce around the question of whose understanding and appreciation are to be conveyed and, as such, speak directly into the form and influence of the AHD, together with a questioning of Tilden's axiom that audiences are open to persuasion.

In response to the recent impetus to enhance wider participation, British institutions have tended to move towards a constructivist interpretative approach (Hein 1998, 155-179; Simon 2010) which shares the philosophy of self-direction found in discovery learning but differs in that there is some form of validation of any conclusions, even if these do not accord with desired institutional outcomes (Hein 1998, 35-36). Constructionism has at its core the belief that learning is incrementally created using current and past knowledge which allows audiences to create their own meanings and apply their own values when engaging with heritage (Black 2005, 140). Extreme relativism is, however, avoided through the agency of 'communities of interpretation' which act to legitimise the boundaries of meaning (Fish 1980; Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 78-80) and thus validate any conclusions. These communities are a social construct and should not be conceived as having any existence other than through the interpretative act. Their members unconsciously enter and leave these group and may simultaneously belong to any number of such communities. Interpretative communities may be judged to resonate with concepts of social capital (Moore 2014) and offer a model through which the AHD may both be seen to exert its influence and be challenged. While a constructivist approach may have been widely claimed to have been institutionally adopted, too often it can be expressed as inductivism (Osborne 1998, 8), that is where learning is seen to occur through experience, rather than developing the core of constructionism which is an appreciation of active learning centred around the individual (1998, 9). A constructivist institution does therefore not necessarily dismiss some degree of didacticism but rather, and more fundamentally, embraces the visitor as a fellow intellectual traveller and invites the creation of meaning in ways which award agency to the audience (Sitzia 2017). This goes some way to answering the somewhat fundamental question of how audiences might create meaning around unfamiliar, complex and entangled concepts (Black 2005, 141).

The form of heritage interpretation and display is directed by a wide variety of factors. Whilst professionals often have considerable ambition and a clear vision of what they wish to achieve, outcomes will be shaped by considerations both within and without of institutions. Perhaps the most axiomatic constraint is one of funding, not least in the atmosphere of post-COVID-19 austerity. The pandemic had a detrimental impact on the heritage sector (Guest 2020) requiring the negotiation of new pathways and partnerships (Volanakis et al 2024). Recent closures and redundancies (e.g. English Heritage 2025) have paralleled a decline in the contribution of the heritage sector to the wider British economy (Centre for Economic and Business Research 2024). As any investment in interpretative display may reach tens of thousands of pounds, with a cost of at least £300-500 per square foot (Parry 2024), professionals are necessarily constrained by budgets. An associated limitation may be the need to configure exhibitions and interpretations to the parameters laid out by external funding bodies. The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) is, for example, a major source of otherwise unavailable financial support (Paddon 2016, 9-17) and applications need to be fashioned around its funding criteria to be successful (Williams and Colls 2020). This has led to the acknowledgment of the influence of HLF funding criteria in a wide spread of modern constructions of the past (Tandy 2018). In the arena of religious heritage, the HLF excludes the funding of the promotion of the causes or beliefs of faith organisations (Trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, undated), inviting reflection on where the boundaries between heritage, promotion and religion lie.

Those responsible for interpretation are also constrained by the inheritances they receive. This includes buildings, which may themselves be historically significant, that were created around principles located in outdated meanings that are no longer viewed as helpful for modern audiences (Hein 1998, 159-160) or where the development in the understanding of visitor experience has rendered the physical environment obsolete (Fitzgerald 2005; Paddon 2016; Tzortzi 2016). On protected heritage sites standing remains offer little adaptability and inherited fixed interpretative schemes, which following considerable investment may be expected to have lifespans of a decade or more, present professionals with few opportunities for revision or adjustment. Overall, ‘...restrictions and difficulties actually force museum teams to embrace the architecture and to focus on how to work with it, not against it’ (Paddon 2016, 101).

Interpretations must be accessible and engaging for audiences, requiring negotiations that range from the form and language of labels and panels (Serrell 1996; Bennett 2019) to the architecture of the places where interpretation is to be found (Tzortzi 2016). It also extends to the breadth and depth of schemes, not least when trying to avoid so-called ‘museum fatigue’ (Davey 2005; Bitgood 2009). One of the causes of this gradual disengagement of visitors during a visit is an overwhelming volume of interpretation, often associated with the consideration of complex concepts. Amongst the solutions to this is the strict enforcement of word limits in the scope of interpretative schemes, requiring professionals to closely reflect on essential messages (Paddon 2016, 137-8) despite this seeming a counterintuitive response to the presentation of complexity.

Digital interpretation is increasingly used in heritage places as a way of enhancing audience engagement, with virtual or augmented reality technology being the latest stage in its evolutionary development (Tussyadiah 2018; Serravalle et al 2019; Way et al 2023). Digital platforms offer a breadth of opportunities:

Digital technology also offers numerous opportunities for increasing intellectual access to collections. Such as providing alternative interpretive language, or by allowing the visitor to explore the collections and related interpretation at their own preferred pace or route. When using a digital platform for interpretation, you have the power to bring text, video and sound into a museum or gallery space, adding context and allowing visitors to respond to the collections on their own terms. (Museums Galleries Scotland 2024)

Digital interpretation is, however, costly and not necessarily a universal panacea in that it must be of high quality, intrinsically reliable and universally accessible if it is to accommodate audience expectations (Paddon 2016, 85; Fan et al 2024). It must also be meaningfully integrated into schemes: ‘museums should not include digital interpretation simply because they’ve been told it’s what they ought to be doing. This could lead to an underdeveloped interpretive approach’ (Museums Galleries Scotland 2024). The relatively simple expedient of including in displays QR codes that link to layered interpretation offers exciting possibilities, especially in the development of complex themes, where sequential

depth (Ham 2013, 174-203) can be developed and age or interest targeted content created. Investment is, however, required to ensure seamless connectivity (Museums Galleries Scotland 2024) and may also be needed in the provision of handheld devices; it cannot be assumed that every member of the audience will carry their own smartphone or tablet, indeed this may enhance inequalities, nor that they will necessarily be compatible with the systems and software that have been used. Given the resources, however, perhaps the only thing that limits digital interpretation is the creative imagination.

The place of religion in heritage settings has been subject to recent scholarly investigation, largely as a response to the development of the material approach (Paine 2013; Buggeln et al 2017). As a discrete area of study, however, the interpretation of religious sites has received limited attention, although with some notable exceptions (e.g. Buggeln and Franco 2018). In a majority of Anglophone interpretative literature, including those publications which are designed to pragmatically guide interpreters, little attention is given to questions of how Christian belief and artefacts are to be interpreted. This may be because there is an assumption that in western societies there is, to use Bourdieu's framework, sufficient cultural capital (Moore 2014; Bourdieu 2021) to create meaning, even though it may be erroneous to assume that modern capitals necessarily give insight on the past. The concept of capital has been extended into religious and spiritual fields (Guest 2007) and may be further extended into discourses around religious literacy, although these are dynamic and contested (Robertson 2022; Wolfart 2022). The relevance of these is made clear in the body of evidence which describes an ongoing, generalised, western disassociation with Christianity (Taylor 2007; Holland 2019) accompanied in Britain by the development of highly individualised spiritualities and ambivalence, or even hostility, to religious themes (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). These trends suggest an increasing unfamiliarity with the tenets and practices of Christian belief, the presentation of which is also likely alien to the growing number who profess other faiths or none (Office for National Statistics 2021). Perhaps more fundamentally, it is uncertain to what degree the capitals which large segments of modern audiences hold enable them to empathise and engage with the religious lived experience of previous generations, whose lives and actions may seem largely incomprehensible.



A further consideration is in questions around the way in which the performance of heritage is received by those who view it, something widely understood to relate to questions around perceptions of authenticity (Jamal and Hill 2004; Chhabra 2008; Penrose 2018; Ramkissoon and Uysal 2018; further discussed in pp. 135-139 below). While heritage professionals may dwell on questions about what they wish to say and how to enable the construction of those messages, a body of evidence suggests that audiences are not passive consumers and often arrive at the doors of institutions looking for the affirmation of previously held understandings with highly developed strategies to resist any attempts to change their internal narrative (Pekarik and Schreiber 2012; Smith 2021, 3). Indeed, visitors may consciously reject any interpretational intent in favour of their own emotive interpretative scheme (Smith 2021, 4). This occurs not simply when the viewer belongs to those traditionally privileged groups which receive validation through the AHD but may also be found in those who look for liberal or progressive affirmation (2021, 6). This invites the question as to why attempt to interpret at all, would it not be better to present places and things without any panels or labels and allow heritage sites to become either places of mass entertainment or the preserve of the cognisant few? The answer to this is twofold. Firstly, it moves to address inequalities in cultural capital and, secondly, it creates opportunities for the authentic expression of sometimes opposed values in order to facilitate a societal discourse where multiple voices can opine on the past in order to achieve a consensus on the direction for the future: ‘this new paradigm of interpretation, ... can offer a path forward towards renewing rational, non-dogmatic public discussion about how heritage sites can help us to understand how we arrived in our present often-conflicted social, economic and political situations – and where we should go from here’ (Silberman 2013, 31).

## **7. Communities and Heritage**

The roles which heritage, despite a breadth of definition, plays in the self-ideation of individuals and societies has received considerable scholarly attention (McDowell 2008; Jones 2019) even though, in British discourse at least, there is no single narrative as to why the past is important to people (Jones 2019, 95). The axiom that heritage provides value to communities and individuals is enshrined in a wide variety of legislation and binding agreements, for instance the widely referenced Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 2013), and

expressed practically in the award criteria of funding bodies such as the HLF (Trustees of the National Heritage Memorial Fund 2024). The claims of the benefits of an active engagement with heritage largely coalesce around the conferring of a sense of identity and belonging, where memory and place combine to enhance wellbeing, community coherence and shared values (Smith 2006; Harrison 2013; Jones 2017; Jones 2019). While such benefits are often located in local communities, what it means to talk about community is open to debate and, in some cases, the definitions that have been employed can be shown to be concerned as much with speculative claims of relevance than reflecting realities (Waterton and Smith 2010). Nonetheless, the principles of participatory heritage practice reinforce the notion that some form of ownership takes place outside of the binaries of conceiving heritage as property and in this local communities are stakeholders. What the basis of this ownership is, what form it takes, and where its limits are, remain open to debate (Bunning 2019; Flinn and Sexton 2019, 625). Nonetheless, the social value of heritage within communities is consistently reported and well-rehearsed (Jones 2017).

The engagement of local communities in heritage practice is widely observed in museology through the conceptualisation of co-curation and community participation (Black 2005; Simon 2010; Ambrose and Paine 2012; Bunning 2019; Westwater 2024) and in archaeology, evidenced primarily in the literature concerned with public or community archaeology (Jameson 2019). In reviewing these engagements, Andrew Flinn and Anna Sexton (2019) note an occasionally uneven relationship between the academy and community groups, edging towards misunderstanding and distrust, a feature which John Jameson relates to elitism and power displays from within the AHD (2019, 4-5). However, the sustained advocacy of meaningful public engagement suggests an ongoing sea change in the relationships between heritage professionals and the communities in which they are located, with participatory approaches, even when their definition is problematic and outcomes uncertain, becoming more widespread if not normative (Flinn and Sexton 2019, 625).

In terms of concepts of the ownership of religious heritage, patterns and pathways are frequently entangled and contested (Brooks 2012). It remains an open question as to how modern, ostensibly secular, multivalent local communities can claim ownership of, or continuity with, early medieval religious sites, although such associations can evidentially be

powerful sources of identity (e.g. Jones 2004) and, as part of the wider heritage network, provide economic benefit (Centre for Economic and Business Research 2024). Equally, whether those modern faith communities whose self-understanding is located in a received religious inheritance can exert agency in heritage contexts seems largely unexplored in British literature (an exception being Gilchrist 2020, 145-175), which, while being highly developed regarding the post-colonial engagement of indigenous faith groups, is largely silent in regard to Christian actors. An exception to this, however, is where archaeologists have engaged with modern Christian monasticism and an ethnographic approach has been applied with the aim of using contemporary monastic communities as reflections of those of the past (e.g. Aston, 2000, 100-14; Gilchrist 2020, 8-9). This can have considerable influence on researchers not least where previously objectified individuals are allowed agency, thus transforming scholarly understanding (Gilchrist 2020, 8). Overall, the centrality of local communities in the performance of heritage is well attested, although the place of religious groups is less well defined.

## **8. The Relevance of Heritage Theory to this Study**

In developing the concept of the Authorised Heritage Discourse, Smith (2006) offers a framework which may be used to describe the flow of influences which bring about the presentation of heritage in modern contexts, centring on the control of epistemological knowledge and the authorisations which it offers. This framework has been successfully used by Gilchrist (2020) to describe heritage approaches to later medieval religion, where she identifies processes which act to define how faith has been interpreted, and where she observes the advocacy of essentialisms, the subalterning of demurring voices and the privileging of the economic, aesthetic and technological over spiritual and lived experience. Paralleling these platforms are the insights of Bourdieu (2021) concerning capitals, theorising how they enable engagement with both heritage and religion, and the work of Fish (1980), Hein (1998) and others in describing how modern meaning is made by communities and individuals.

Combined, these various theorisations enable a ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973, 3- 30) of the social actions which lie at the root of the discourses which this research aims to describe. The scaffolding which they provide acts to resist any drift into ‘intuitionism and alchemy’ (1973,

30) offering frameworks around which discourses can be detected and observed, enabling fuller description and analysis.

## **b. Issues in the Study of Christian Northumbria**

Research into Christian Northumbria is a vibrant field, one inspired by the wealth of material and written sources that offer a, perhaps unparalleled, insight into the beliefs and practices of its early medieval people. This is, however, not to suggest that this it is fully, or even partially, understood and open questions continue to engage both archaeologists and historians alike. Of these, perhaps the most intriguing is how the process of the conversion of 7<sup>th</sup> century Northumbria occurred and a comprehensive account of the progression from paganism to a Christianised society remains evasive. It is, for instance, uncertain how Christianisation took place outside of elites and whether it is legitimate to conceptualise a period of co-existence between two distinct world views. Once Christianity was established it remains equally unclear as to what extent it was understood through the lens of traditional Anglian belief and whether pagan traditions were abandoned or absorbed. In some ways this mirrors modernity where different beliefs and worldviews continue to evolve in spaces vacated by previously dominant religious discourses. The conversion period is, therefore, a window offering an insight from the past into our own time in that it is about changing values, identities and beliefs.

The monasteries form the primary evidential base for the materiality and agency of the Northumbrian Church. However, the archaeological interpretation of religious sites and artefacts presents distinct challenges. While the importance of the monasteries is evident in early medieval sources, the ways in which they functioned and their relationship with wider Anglian society remains uncertain and has become a focus of debate (Gittos 2011, 826). What can be said with some certainty is that they were neither static in form or function and that there was a wide variety of monastic expression in the Northumbrian Church. The monasteries, therefore, offer interpreters not only the challenge of presenting the materialities of places and things but also the representation of the complex and dynamic worldviews of

those who inhabited and created them. This is important in modern discourses where the ability to empathise with religious perspectives may be diminishing and there is a necessity to negotiate away from the false binaries of over-simplification. While documentary sources provide insight into both the conversion and the monasteries, it is only through the material that many of the theories that surround early medieval faith can be tested and further developed. Archaeological discovery continues at pace, adding to the weight of the evidence which can be deployed in the understanding of the lived experience of Northumbrian Christians. This experience, it will be argued, has been somewhat overlooked but must, nonetheless, be a central element in interpretations if they are to be impactful in encouraging informed debate around how the past may inform the present.

## **1. The Process of Conversion**

### **a. Sub-Roman Christianity**

Christianity in the Roman provinces of Britain was significantly integrated with that in the rest of the Empire (Thomas 1981; Petts 2003). As direct Roman influence waned ‘we should envisage a continuing Roman [Church] limited by the peculiarly severe collapse of material civilization around it’ (Blair 2005, 11). The relationship of this British Church with the pagan Anglian, Jute and Saxon incomers of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries continues to be a subject of debate (Loveluck and Laing 2011). In the militarised zone of northern England, in what would become one of the heartlands of Northumbria, a paucity of urban centres may have led to a society distinct from that in the rest of Britain (Loveluck 2002) centred around the erstwhile imperial garrisons (Lloyd 2008; Collins 2013). The continued place of Christianity is suggested, for instance, in the interpretation of an apsidal building at Vindolanda as a church (Birley and Alberti 2021).

The archaeological record offers limited material evidence for Roman and sub-Roman Christianity (Petts 2003), though this balance is gradually shifting because of a growing sensitivity in fieldwork techniques and the success of the Portable Antiquities Scheme

(Carver 2019, xxii & 75). In the absence of definitive material evidence much reliance has been placed on written sources which have received considerable and varied scholarly attention, albeit with more recent acknowledgement that they must be used with some degree of caution (Petts and Turner 2011, 3). In particular, while the writings of Bede (d. 735) may be viewed to have considerable utility in illuminating the British Church an uncritical reliance on their accuracy may be misplaced (Shaw 2015; Pickles 2018, 3).

The failure of the 596 Gregorian mission to England to engage with the extant British Church suggests a lack of Papal comprehension of the demise of urban life in Britain and the non-existence of an ecclesiastical structure in which the mission might initially shelter (Yorke 2014). This, coupled with a certain high-handedness on the part of Augustine himself, led to an irredeemable breakdown of relationships between the Roman party and the indigenous British Church (2014, 118). Incidents such as the reported deaths of 1,200 British monks at the hands of the Northumbrian army during the battle of Chester (EH II 2) would be unlikely to bring about a rapport between the British and emerging Anglian Churches. Nonetheless, bishoprics and churches in the West Country seem to have passed smoothly from British to Saxon control during the 7<sup>th</sup> century suggesting the possibility of mechanisms other than a simple displacement and implying some meaningful engagement between the two traditions (Yorke 2014, 119-21). A Northumbrian incremental absorption of British Christianity is suggested by factors which might include the presence of British burial customs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century at the monastery at Hartlepool (Daniels 2007) and the 8th century Anglian appropriation of St Ninan into Northumbrian hagiography (Wood, 2007). Conversely, however, factors such the need for Chad's (d. 672) reconsecration because of deficiencies in the orders of the two British bishops who had been involved in his initial consecration (EH II 4) and Bede's ongoing disdain for British Church (Stancliffe 2007) suggest a different narrative. Overall, the processes by which the Northumbrian church came replace the British are occluded, not least at Whithorn (Cramp 1995 and p. 85 below).

## **b. The Conversion of Northumbria**

The conversion of Northumbria has been largely interpreted through contemporary written sources centring initially on the activities of King Edwin of Deira and Bernicia (d. 632/633) and Bishop Paulinus (d. 644) (EH II 14). Traditionally Bede's account has been taken at face value as has his telling of the engagement of Edwin's successor Oswald (d. 641/642) with the Irish monastery at Iona and the subsequent arrival of the monk Aidan (d. 651) on Lindisfarne (EH III 3). It is of some note that the first Ionan mission failed, and that Aidan's mission was a response to this (EH III 5). The necessity of the employment of a different model for evangelism suggests that the introduction of Ionan Christianity into Northumbrian polity was at some level contested. Bede records Oswald's motivations in both spiritual and political terms: 'Oswald... was anxious that the whole race under his rule should be filled with the grace of the Christian faith of which he had so wonderfully an experience in overcoming the barbarians' (EH III 3). However, there is a tendency in some academic discourse to dismiss religious motivation in favour of the political and so Anglo-Saxon kings may be portrayed as seeking stabilisation and a deepening control through the imposition of a hierarchical religious system (Higham 1997, Yorke 2014, Higham and Ryan 2015). More recently, Thomas Pickles, noting the importance of kinship groups within Anglian polity, has suggested that the motivations of kingly conversion may have included the necessity to respond to the implicit threat of a growing Christian conviction within some of these groups (2018, 95-96). Kings may equally have found considerable advantage in being able to deploy the concepts of divine adoption inherent in Christian notions of kingship and as a mechanism to lay claims on the inheritance of an imperial past whose material remains likely retained significant visibility (Blair 2005, 50-51; Pickles 2018, 97-98). The scope of this *romanitas* may even have extended beyond Rome to the Eastern Empire which offered a model for a hegemonic, wealthy Christianised society (Gittos 2024).

Higham (1997) views Northumbria as a pioneering kingdom in that, as Oswald was succeeded by Oswiu (d. 670), it was the first place in England where Christianity survived dynastic change as a state-sponsored religion and conceptualises this as being indicative of the utility of Christianity in Northumbrian polity. Yorke (2014) develops this theme and sees in Oswiu's support for the Roman cause at the Synod of Whitby in 664 a desire to adopt a

belief system held to have greater capacities to facilitate the aims of kingship. This is, however, not to necessarily dismiss spiritual convictions and motivations, rather to acknowledge them as being part of the complex patterns which made up early medieval polity (2014, 238). Amongst these entanglements remained the powerful draw of Rome, a feature in part theological, in part an awareness of barely attainable material and societal sophistications. As Blair notes: ‘the more that the English came in contact with their Christian neighbours the more they may have felt themselves a pagan backwater’ (Blair 2005, 50). The channels for this awareness, the commercial, political and religious contacts between England and continental Europe, are probably significantly underestimated in popular understanding (Ferguson 2011; Carver 2019, 20).

### **c. The Materiality of Conversion**

The question of how pre-Christian religion was experienced by the inhabitants of Bernicia and Deira remains largely open because of the lack of written sources although material traces continue to offer new insights (Pluskowski 2011, 766-767). There are suggestions of ritualistic practice, for instance the so-called ‘temple’ at Yeavering (Hope-Taylor 1977), while a relationship between landscape and belief is suggested in the archaeological record (Semple 2010 & 2011). It remains the case, however, that much of the evidence that helps illuminate Anglian paganism comes from the writings of the post-conversion Church, evidence from which may be best understood as that of a hostile witness (Carver 2010; Pluskowski 2011). The dynamic of conversion thus becomes difficult to discern as does any entanglement of concepts and ideas. Andreas Nordberg (2019) suggests that pre-Christian Norse religion was located in at least three different religious configurations and that in moving between the strands of the cultural ecology of society, individuals would also congruously alternate between discrete beliefs (2019, 359). Speculatively, if similarities between Anglian and Norse religion are allowed (Carver 2010, 5; Pluskowski 2011, 772-773) an inference could be that, in adopting the Christianity of elites, other societal groups could claim a new religious parity which, hitherto, had been unavailable to them. Some support for this may be in the observation that there is no evidence that Anglians converted to paganism in the Danelaw, rather that Scandinavians converted to Christianity (Pluskowski 2011, 774).



Burial practice is often seen as a key material barometer of the process of conversion where a decline of grave goods and an increase in east/west supine inhumation following accepted Christian tradition might be anticipated. There are, however, significant impediments to such a view in the archaeological record (Welch 2011) such as the presence of grave goods in apparently post-conversion graves (Groves 2011, 260). It is unlikely that there was a simplistic dichotomy between pagan and Christian burial practice, rather a period where a variety of socio-economic factors came together to bring about a gradual move to unfurnished, orientated inhumation (Blair 2005, 58-59; Yorke 2006, 213; Welch 2011). In this way, the presence of artefacts in graves is not necessarily a defining factor in identifying religious affiliation or a belief system (Blair 2005, 59; Welch 2011).

The visibility of the conversion period through burial is further compounded by an apparent diffidence towards funereal practice on the part of earliest Christians (Petts 2011, 100). Prior to 670 there is no evidence in England beyond the Kentish royal family for any general expectation to lie in consecrated ground, if indeed such a concept existed (Blair 2005, 59). During the conversion period and beyond, the graves of ancestors offered both territorial definition and supernatural protection to their descendants and this was a defining factor in the choice of burial site, regardless of religious adherence (Blair 2005, 59; 2018, 75-78). It is evident, however, that there was a gradual move towards burials associated with minsters from the late 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Gittos 2013, 52; Foot 2006, 312) although inhumation within church buildings was largely reserved for royalty, such as those of Edwin and Oswiu in the Church of the Holy Apostle Peter at Whitby (EH III 24), abbots (Foot 2006, 314) or for those whose who might later be characterised as saints (Blair 2005, 59). In this latter case initial burial outside of the church may have been normative and a later interment in an above ground shrine within a church was a part of the confirmation of the sanctity of the individual (Rollason 1989, 35-36; Gittos 2013, 98). Bede describes this process in relation to Lindisfarne's saintly bishop Cuthbert (d. 687) and the subsequent role of his shrine as a place of intercession for the sick (EH IV 30-32). Throughout the period benefit appears to have been sought by burial in proximity to those regarded as being exemplars of the Christian life with various foci reported in the archaeological record (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 266). This may reasonably be located in the context of the belief of the efficacy of relics for the living and, by extension, for the dead.

The lived experience of the conversion through the parallel lives of pagans and Christians may be couched in processual terms where the key interest is one of discerning how an essentialist Christianity could co-exist with pagan belief (e.g. Yorke 2014). However, other scholars contest such approaches. Carver (2011, 201-2) overlays his concept of intellectual communities on Christianity and dismisses an essentialist view, not least in observing the mixed iconography that emerges through artefacts such as the Franks Casket. As to why the Christian mission was ultimately successful, it may be that pre-conversion religious practitioners already held patterns which could become associated with Christian practice. Thus, the aesthetic, peregrinatory spirituality which would come to distinguish Irish monastic spirituality was in this view already a familiar pattern of religious expression for Anglian communities (Burn, 1969, 2-6; Carver, 2009, 350-351). This may go some way to explain several other features of the period such the apparent ease with which land could be given for monastic development, acknowledging the different conceptualisation of land ownership in the period (Charles-Edwards, 1972, 3-33), in that it may have already been used for religious purposes. As Carver notes, such suggestions are highly speculative (2009, 351) but they do serve as an important corrective to narratives which would place the conversion into a void where faith structures, physical or societal, were largely absent and act as a reminder of the breadth of religious expression (Brown 2003c., 335).

## **2. The Monasteries**

### **a. Identification and Excavation**

The material evidence for the early Northumbrian church has been gained primarily through the excavation of monasteries, a reflection of the ‘near invisibility’ (Blair 2011, 739) of smaller churches and one echoed in extant heritage sites. As such, the archaeology of monasticism is a key source in the understanding of Northumbrian Christianity and so a focus of interpretative performance. The excavation of early monasteries does, however, present

particular challenges. Many sites were re-built following the Norman conquest and those such as Durham, Hexham, Ripon and Tynemouth lie under later medieval structures which are themselves significant and protected. Even where more extensive excavation has been possible, for instance at Jarrow and Whithorn (Cramp 1969 & 2005; Hill 1997), its scope has been necessarily limited by extant structures and usage. At Lindisfarne modern building covers much of the anticipated monastic enclosure (Petts 2017a; Jackson et al 2022) while at Whitby the combined limitations of medieval and later building have been accentuated by coastal erosion leading to the loss of part of the site (Ward 2002; Wilmott 2017). Overall, no Northumbrian monastic site has yet been excavated in its entirety and so interpretation relies on parts of the whole (Gittos 2011, 829).

An understanding of the spatial arrangement of early monasteries is frustrated by complex stratigraphy (Petts 2017b) and the use of ligneous building materials (Blair 2018). This has meant that historically significant data has been lost where less developed excavation techniques have been applied (Rahtz 1976 & 1995). The recognition of monastic structures is further discouraged by difficulties in distinguishing between ecclesiastical and secular forms of building (Blair 2005, 204 – 212 & 2018, 131-136) and the utility of many objects in both ecclesiastical and lay settings, compounded by the likelihood of the donation of some redundant liturgical objects for lay use (Blair 2005, 259n & 2011, 733). Whilst worked stone remains a key diagnostic feature (Petts 2017b), it is a problematic tool in understanding a world primarily constructed from wood. There are several areas of Northumbria, such as the modern Yorkshire Dales and areas of North West England, where ecclesiastical settlement might be expected yet where no worked stone has been discovered (2017b). There may, however, be other identifiers. Carver (2009, 342-343) suggests that numerology, evidenced not only in artistic design but also in square and symmetrical buildings, is a particular indicator of an ecclesiastical presence.

## **b. The Spatial Arrangement of Monasteries**

Although scholarly appreciation of ecclesiastical spatial arrangements is incomplete, there are recurring features. These include the presence of one or more churches (often axially aligned), burials and an enclosing vallum (Blair 2005, 196-204; Carver 2009, 335-345; Gittos 2011, 829; Petts 2017b; Campbell et al 2019). Religious communities would be supported by other buildings, although to describe these as refectories, dormitories and chapter houses is not necessarily appropriate as this superimposes the assumptions implicit in later monastic models onto earlier practice. There was also a need for a wide variety of ancillary buildings to house functions which might include metal working and the industrial processes necessary to produce books (Carver 2009). Monasteries were resourced by extensive estates and so required the infrastructure to both manage them and to store and process the capitals they produced. Excavation suggests that monastic sites were divided into zones which were reflective of their function (Hill 1996; Cramp 2005) and, moreover, that these functions and associated zoning changed over time (Petts 2017b). While the number of professed community members in monasteries remains debated, and may have been quite small (Foot 2006, 138-139), the scale of the mechanisms required to support monastic life were extensive and would have required a developed network of retainers and estate workers. The frequency of child burial at monastic sites suggests that such workers could be accompanied by their families. Overall, early medieval monasteries should not be conceived as being isolated eremitical places but rather extensive settlements with a zoned ritual centre at their core. They were ‘at the top of the settlement hierarchy’ (Gittos 2011, 828).

The monastic site on Iona has been as thoroughly excavated as any other comparable site (Campbell et al., 2019) and is likely to have been influential in the arrangement of the monastery on Lindisfarne and the houses which sprang from it. In bringing aspects of previous excavations to publication, Ewan Campbell and Adrián Maldonado (2020) discuss the lived experience at Iona and include the suggestion that monastery plan was conceived to be a representation of the New Jerusalem of the biblical Book of Revelation (21:10-27). This is suggestive of a developed conceptualisation of the meaning of the monastery whose spatial

arrangements were more than the simple accidents of growth and contraction but rather reflections of spiritual intent. The extension of the vallum at Iona (Campbell and Maldonado 2020, 54) demonstrates change in the spatial arrangements of the monastery, presumably in response to the changing size or nature of the community it housed. The purpose of the vallum may have been multivalent and could have included the indication of an area from which some were excluded, the marking of an area where different regulation applied or functioning to emphasise varying ritual or ontological meaning. To suggest that a vallum effected a demarcation between sacred and secular space requires, however, careful navigation through what is meant by sacred space in modern discourse (Davies, 1994b) with the attendant danger of the overlaying of contemporary concepts on early medieval understanding (Ó Carragáin, 2010, 83-4).

The materiality of early medieval sites helps inform the lived experience which Bede and others record. In the communal celebration of the liturgy, both the offices and the Mass, the size and layout of churches become indicators of how those services may have been structured (Gittos 2013, 149-160). The practical implication of Bede's statement that the combined communities at Jarrow and Wearmouth numbered 600 brothers in 716 as Abbot Ceolfrith left on his final journey to Rome sits awkwardly with the relatively modestly sized churches that are known (Foot 2006, 172). Bede may have exaggerated or miscalculated the size of the community, but equally his statement invites speculation as to how the monastic community was formed and organised. The application of material evidence to the written record continues to provide a rich seam in the understanding of the lived experience in monastic houses.

### **c. Life in the Monasteries**

A source of debate from the late 20th century onwards has been the so-called 'minster hypothesis' (Cambridge and Rollason 1995; Blair 2005; Pickles 2018, 6-12) which revolves around the relationship between the monasteries and minsters of contemporaneous writings and the pastoral care that existed outside of them. Although the terms of this debate subsequently became confused (Gittos 2011, 826) its roots are in the assertion that lay engagement with the Church was primarily through the monasteries, bracketing any

episcopal role and pre-empting parochial structures, themselves viewed as later innovations (Blair 2005). In contesting a cloistral located Church, other scholars have pointed to the pastoral engagement of bishops in Anglo-Saxon polity and the maintenance of the cult of saints outside of the monasteries which suggested a wider clerical agency (Cubitt 2009). The debate has largely moved into an uneasy peace with a broad agreement that the activities of the Church from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries were largely multivalent, albeit with different emphases at different points in time (Gittos 2011, 826-830). Any contestation which was brought about by the use of the Latin term *monasterium* and the Old English *mynster* in contemporaneous documents has been circumvented by the acknowledgement that the two were used interchangeably and that both terms embrace a multiplicity of expressions of religious life. Monasteries are best understood as places where some form of gathered community of people described themselves as holding a religious ethos (Gittos 2011, 826). They could act as ‘central places’ (Blair 2005, 246), possibly as *wics*, or hold some relationship to royal villas and episcopal households (Thomas 2013). Their membership included members of the elite and supported notions of family at a time when familial association was prized (Foot 2006, 347).

At least some contemporary Northumbrians conceptualised an idealised monastic form, evidenced by the so-called false or pseudo-minsters whose existence was an offence to Bede and his monastic contemporary Boniface (d. 754) (Foot 2006, 127-134). The charge laid against these foundations, which appeared from the early 8th century, was that they were conduits of secular ambition rather than channels for salvation. Under lay control they subverted the monastic spiritual model and the estates which were endowed to them in perpetuity, thus keeping them under the influence of kinship groups, were removed from the traditional cycle of royal patronage where land was offered in reward of service (Foot 2006 129-130; Higham and Ryan 2013, 206). This presented a growing challenge to Anglian polity and enabled the development of an ‘ecclesiastical aristocracy’ (Pickles 2018, 114-116). These minsters blurred boundaries in early medieval society where ‘there was often little difference between the atmosphere of the aristocratic hall and that of monastic precincts. Individuals could move freely between the two’ (Higham and Ryan 2013, 208). That the Church considered these developments a threat is suggested by the necessity of councils such as that at Hertford in 672/3 and those subsequently at *Clofesho*, where attempts were made to regulate clerical discipline (Cubitt 1995) alongside the development of mechanisms to

prevent lay appropriation of monastic lands (Higham and Ryan 2013, 208). While these councils may be primarily concerned with the relationship between the Church and an aristocratic elite (Blair 2005, 108; Higham and Ryan 2013, 207-8) they are themselves a symptom of the hybridity of early medieval monastic models. Furthermore, the pseudo-minsters speak to the rapidity of the acceptance of monasticism in Anglian society, a move which could apparently subvert an established militaristic culture (Pickles 115-116).

Unanswered questions around the functional operation of the minsters remain. While there is agreement that there was monastic pastoral engagement outside of the vallum (Blair 2005, 152; Foot 2006, 285-321) it is uncertain what form this took and the extent to which it was embraced. Although by 800 most of the English population lived within walking distance of a minster (Blair 2005, 152; Gittos 2011, 827), the relationship between local populations and minsters remains occluded even where minsters were located at the centre of their own estates. It is likely that the monasteries acted to support estate chapels and pilgrimage sites (Gittos 2011, 826) but the details of these remain elusive. A second question concerns how networks of minsters, most notably Monkwearmouth-Jarrow and Hexham-Ripon-Oundle, functioned. Some scholars have suggested that such associations were more common than has been supposed (Foot 2006, 251-258) with the attendant inference that commonalities in foundation and ethos may be reflected in material remains (Gittos 2011, 827). The nature of life in Northumbrian monasteries remains open to some conjecture with an abundance of material evidence suggesting at that at least some inhabitants enjoyed relatively comfortable lifestyles contrasting with widely held modern perceptions of austerity. The membership of minster communities has received developed scholarly attention (Foot 2006) although elements such as the oblation of young children (2006, 140) and the inconvenient truth of the presence of slaves on monastic estates (2006, 181-183) serves to disrupt modern sensibilities.

While the place of tonsured men in the monastic economy is well understood that of consecrated women is far less certain. Some may have led lives which had an equivalence to the cloistered nun of later centuries but the wide variety of expression of female religious life, and the terms used to describe it, has led some scholars to reject the use of 'nun' in the pre-Viking age church (Foot 2006, 9). The rapid expansion of the number of minsters from the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied by the gifting of land and a boom in church construction (Gittos

2013, 154-156), was followed by a period of lay reassertion over the control of assets and monastic contraction, especially amongst female communities (Blair 2005, Foot 2006, Gittos 2011). The reasons for these processes remain points of debate though they were likely connected with the growth of pseudo-minsters, with the real possibility that the need to supply monastic estates to support an ecclesiastical elite destabilised Anglian polity (Pickles 2018).

### **3. Christian Materialities**

#### **a. Worked Stone**

The corpus of carved stone from the period provides an enigmatic glimpse into Northumbrian beliefs and practices. While the early medieval world was one primarily of wood and timber, it should not be assumed that there was any socio-cultural inferiority placed on wooden artefacts (Bintley and Shapland 2013, 3; Blair 2018, 68-9). It therefore becomes difficult to evaluate what meanings the materiality of stone may have had and whether there could have been wooden parallels or other objects whose form and function are now lost (Blair 2018, 92). Bede's record of Oswald erecting a wooden cross in 633/634 immediately prior to the Battle of Heavenfield (EH III 2), combined with its survival into his own day, is suggestive of some degree of material equivalence in the creation of meaning. The iconography of carvings continues to be a matter of debate which in turn leads to more general questions of function. Northumbrian sculpture should overall be viewed as fragmentary not least because, with exception of the Irton and Bewcastle high crosses, it has been moved from its original context (Hawkes 2021, 209) and meanings afforded by place are lost (Semple 2011). Considerable reflexivity is required when attempting to describe and understand the role such sculpture played because 'our receptions and perceptions are, therefore, as fragmented, our understandings as incomplete, as the original works themselves' (Hawkes 2021, 216).



Surviving stone monuments are variously interpreted as boundary markers, memorials to individuals, preaching crosses, meeting places and visual aids to Christian evangelism. Some were placed outdoors, while others, including standing crosses, stood inside churches (Hawkes 1996, 98). Some of these crosses may have had a liturgical function and while the purpose of others is less clear (Hawkes 2018, 51) the investment in these artefacts allows for multiple intentions in their design and erection. The interpretation of figural panels has received considerable scholarly attention whereas more common elements, particularly that of plant scrolling, less so (Hawkes 2018, 58). That the 8th century Nunnykirk Cross shaft<sup>4</sup> has different forms of scrolling on each of its four faces is, for instance, a pointer to meanings that may have been contemporarily self-evident but are now lost. The polychromatic pigmentation which adorned the crosses together with the paste glass eyes with which many figures were vivified (Hawkes 2018, 47) suggests something of the agency they would have exerted whilst *in situ*.

## **b. Devotional Artefacts**

Perhaps the most iconic artefact from Northumbrian Christianity is the gold and garnet pectoral cross<sup>5</sup> recovered from the coffin of St Cuthbert in 1827. Observable wear and at least one repair (Welch 2011, 273; Lucy 2016, 20) suggest a continuity of use and that it was an object of some value. Of those early medieval crosses which can be successfully placed in a secure context all except that of Cuthbert come from high-status female burials (Lucy 2016, 36), inviting speculation as to its inclusion. Other pectoral crosses, such as the Newball Cross<sup>6</sup> and Wilton Cross<sup>7</sup>, may have been constructed to enable the wearer to either look down on them or to bring them up to eyeline (Lucy 2016, 18), implying some form of tactile devotional action. This suggests that that they were as much designed to have meaning for the wearers as to make an external statement to others.

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<sup>4</sup> Newcastle: Great North Museum NEWMA: 1976.9.A

<sup>5</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL 3.26.1

<sup>6</sup> Skegness: North Lincolnshire Museum 2006.085

<sup>7</sup> London: British Museum 1859,0512.1

An additional dimension is that some crosses may have contained relics (Rollason 1989, 29; Lucy 2016, 31, 36), the prevalence of which is suggested elsewhere. There has been scholarly debate over the function of the corpus of 7<sup>th</sup> century metallic containers that have been recovered from female graves, leading to a variety of identifications including as work boxes or contemporary chatelaines (Hills 2011, 15). Where contents that have been found *in situ* they have included items such as pins and fragments of fabric (2011, 14) but as the containers themselves are often heavily decorated with Christian iconography an alternative explanation has been that they were used to contain relics. It may be that such relics included transient *brandea*, cloth which has touched the relics or tomb of a saint, (Gibson 2022, 70-73) and Catherine Hills has postulated that where no contents have been found they may have contained stones or earth associated with holy sites or individuals (2011, 17). Seventy-one examples have been recovered from forty-nine English sites (Gibson 2022, vi) and while in a Northumbrian context instances are only recorded in Deira (Gibson 2022, xvii) the regularity with which these artefacts are discovered suggests a widespread distribution of relics within early medieval society. Stephanus describes how Queen Eormenburh stripped Bishop Wilfrid (d. 709/10) of his 'reliquary full of relics' (*Life of Wilfred* ch 34) which he was able to wear around his neck (ch 39) with the implication that not only were such reliquaries portable, but they were also part of everyday dress. Bede records the healing power of relics on multiple occasions and in recounting how Thrythred, a monk of an unidentified monastery near the river Dacre, 'entered the church one day and was opening the casket of relics to give part of them to a friend' and gave the friend 'as much as he wanted' (EH IV 32) suggests that there was something if not normative about the transaction, then carrying relics away was relatively mundane and required no further explanation. The crypts at Hexham and Ripon may point to the material investment in housing relics, although it remains unclear whether these are more of an imitation of Roman architecture than indicative of devotional practice (Rollason 1989, 54) or, indeed, a combination of the two.

### **c. Books**

The emblematic illuminated liturgical and Gospel books of the early medieval period point to the prodigious resources which could be marshalled by the monastic communities in which they were created. The Lindisfarne Gospels alone contains velum from around 150 calves,

the quality of which suggests that many more hides would have been rejected (Jackson 2022, 34). This figure is, however, dwarfed by the 1550 calfskins required for the three Bibles that Abbot Ceolfrith (d.716) took from his monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow to Rome in 716 (Brown 2003b., 62). The rationale for the creation of such lavish items seems to vary. Ceolfrith's three Bibles may have been diplomatic gifts but equally could be considered statements affirming the *romanitas* of the Wearmouth/Jarrow monastery in a continental context (Brown 2003b., 62). Traditionally, and with some degree of scholarly consensus, the creation of the Lindisfarne Gospels is linked with the first translation of Cuthbert in 698 and the more formalised emergence of his cult (Brown 2003b., 35). In this way the intention may have been part commemorative or developed from the need to create a focus of devotion and a 'pilgrim magnet' (Brown 2003b., 66). The very presence of sacred books, even unread, may have been understood as talismanic as is suggested by the placing of a copy of St John's Gospel<sup>8</sup> in Cuthbert's coffin, possibly shortly after his death (Gameson 2015), the style of which also acts as a reminder that not all texts were either illuminated or conceived as show pieces and may have been considerably humbler in form and function.

Aside from scripture, other books were invested with meaning. While it is uncertain how they were used liturgically in the early period, the inclusion of a person's name in a *libri vitae*, was considered efficacious (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 212-213). Bede's request in the *Prologue* of his prose *Life of St Cuthbert* for his name to be put in the *libri vitae* at Lindisfarne 'even now' suggests that inclusion was not merely for the dead but also the living. Overall books are associated with the Church both in terms of use and production (Gameson 2011) though their use by clerics outside of ecclesiastical settlements seems certain and so it might be envisaged that many people would have some familiarity with their form if not their content.

The account by the priest scholar Alcuin (d.804) of the erroneous use of the baptismal formula *in nomine patria et filia et spiritus sancti* (in the name of the Holy Spirit with the fatherland and the daughter) rather than the necessary *in nomine patris et fili et spiritus sancti* (in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit') (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 19) raises questions about clerical literacy and, by extension, the degree to which the Latin used by the

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<sup>8</sup> London: British Library Add MS 89000

Church could be understood by those who had never formally been taught it. The insertion of an Old English translation of the Latin text into the Lindisfarne Gospels in around 950 (Brown 2003b., 4) is an interesting commentary on this and wider questions of literacy. While there is little evidence to help interpret how those outside of the monasteries understood the finer points of Christian doctrine and liturgy, a caution should, however, be expressed in that a lack of fluency in Latin does not necessarily imply a society devoid of literacy or one incapable of linguistic or conceptual complexity.

#### **4. Prayer, Spirituality and Lived Beliefs**

Robert Boenig suggests that there is ‘a scarcity of what we now term *mysticism*’ (2000, 29) in early medieval accounts of spirituality. He understands expressions of mysticism to include accounts of spiritual struggle, visions and experiences of God in prayer (2000,29). This seems to overlook that the various *vitae* contain many reports of prophesy, miracles and divine encounters (Volkofsky 2017) and that early medieval writing provides a foundational reference point for later spiritual works (Frantzen 2005). Nonetheless, it remains axiomatic that the descriptive tools of later Christian theological characterisation were not available to Northumbrian authors. It may be that there were contemporary frameworks for understanding, and articulating, spiritual encounter but they have not survived, or at least not in a form that is currently understood. This must act as an important corrective in attempts to offer descriptions of the lived faith experience of the period – a modern spiritual overlay may provide as much distortion as it does illumination, not least when grouped together under the modern banner of ‘Celtic’ spirituality with its tendency to conflate both time and place (Bradley, 1999 & 2018). Likewise, caution should be applied in the production of descriptions which attempt to produce a single model of faith experience, not least in light of Peter Brown’s ‘micro-Christendoms’ (2003c., 355) and Martin Carver’s ‘intellectual communities’ (2011), both of which suggest the possibility of geographical and temporal variation, even on a relatively small scale (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 17).

This is not to say that both primary written sources and the material evidence do not give clear indications of the theological preoccupations of the period. In offering a

characterisation, Boenig (2000, 31-40) identifies eschatological themes as key in understanding the early medieval mind. This aspect of Christian doctrine was, he suggests, readily absorbed because of pre-Christian Germanic beliefs which emphasised the end of time. In this way the pre-Christian story of Wayland the Smith can be portrayed without contradiction alongside the foundation of Rome, the Adoration of the Magi, and the fall of Jerusalem on the Franks Casket, a sequence of events which point inexorably towards the Second Coming of Christ (Marzinzik 2013, 128).

In this world view, the *eschaton* ends the cosmic struggle of good against evil which has been led by the re-presented warrior-hero of Christ and conducted by his *thegns*, the prophets, saints and martyrs of the Bible and Christian history (e.g. Mayr-Harting 1991, 220f; Boenig 2000, 41). These are the new heroes of the canon of Anglian identity and their emulation comes from the ready adoption of the so-called three colours of martyrdom from the Columban tradition, where red equates to physical martyrdom and white to persecution, though especially that of the blue or *glas* (Stancliffe 1982). In reviewing the meaning of *glas*, James Paz (2017, 147-150) identifies not just blue but also the browns, greys and greens that make up the colours of the northern Insular natural world. For Paz this is the martyrdom of Irish asceticism, of saintly warriors such as Cuthbert who engage in spiritual warfare both within and without through the materiality of their own bodies, though in Northumbria this was extended to actual warriors such as Edwin and Oswald. On their death, the relics of these saints are spiritually weaponised so that others, imbued with their power, can continue the struggle up to that point where Christ returns and victory is assured (Paz 2017, 154-8). A proof of this power was in the incorruptible bodies of the saints, in this period a peculiarly Gaulish and English phenomenon (Rollason 1989, 51). Northumbrian Christianity should not, however, be seen as necessarily militaristic despite its clear linkage to a warrior elite (Pickles 2018, 57-92) and its celebration of martyr warrior saints of royal lineage (Rollason 1989, 115). Indeed, as Ian Bradley (2018, 95) points out in his assessment of the Christian belief of the period, there was an emphasis on the pastoral and on peace-making (also Yorke 2006, 231-236). Rather than privileging the proudly martial, penitentials, the genre of literature created to offer a guide on forms of penitence (Frantzen 2008), originating in the Irish tradition point to repentance and self-effacing denial as being normative (Bradley 2018, 95f). Regardless, however, the overwhelming concern of contemporary sources are elites, with a particular privileging of those from royal backgrounds. In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* the

sole exception to the roll call of kings, queens, princesses and warriors is the cowherd come monk-poet Caedmon (Rollason 1989, 93).

Irish discipline and practice in Northumbria is often portrayed in modern popular or devotional material as ending abruptly following the 664 Synod of Whitby (e.g. Adam 2006, 129), a perspective accentuated by the development of modern so-called Celtic spiritualities and parallel church groups (Bradley 1999). Clare Stancliffe conclusively demonstrates, however, that such binaries do not necessarily find support in the available evidence and that a ‘middle party’ (2017, 20) emerged in Northumbria which pragmatically integrated divergent customs. Here there was a hybridisation of different elements of Irish, British and Continental practices which came together to form a ‘Northumbrian tradition of Christianity and a Northumbrian Christian culture’ (2017, 42). The Irish component in this may be characterised by continued links with Ireland together with an emphasis on peregrination and ascetism even in monasteries which may have fully or partially adopted the Benedictine Rule after Wilfrid’s post-664 reforms. A gradual move privileging Roman practice was, perhaps, inevitable in an age of *romanitas* where influential clerics and scholars such as Theodore (d. 690) and Hadrian of Canterbury (d. 710) were sent as part of a concerted papal mission to the English: ‘Theodore and Hadrian are a flaming sun and moon, outshining the twinkling stars of the Irish’ (Blair 2005, 99).

It is difficult to make detailed assertions about the pattern and practice of prayer and worship in the monasteries of the early Northumbrian period because, contrary to the universalising voice of Bede and later writers, the evidence points to a gradual process heading towards a Romanised conclusion which encompassed a multiplicity of monastic rules and interpretations (Blair 2005, 80; Foot 2006, 6). Nonetheless, the aspiration of a disciplined monastic life can be demonstrated (Foot 2006, 189-208) even if the exact form remains unclear. Monastic worship centred around the saying of the Offices (themselves centred around the recitation of the Psalms), the celebration of the Mass and contemplation which Foot (2006, 208-210) allows to include prayer, fasting, reading and vigils. It should be noted that this definition is considerably wider than is allowed in modern Christian thought which is influenced by later Carmelite definitions (e.g. Neville Ward 1983). How these events were

experienced, understood and internalised remains, however, largely hidden and it is necessary to extrapolate them through, for instance, ethnographic approaches albeit with a multiplicity of cautions (Blair 2018, 18). The sources for the lived faith experience come almost exclusively from ecclesiastical contexts and this acts to privilege a world view favouring the classical and urban (Blair 2011, 729). The modern scholarly endeavour becomes one of constructing wider lived experience by using privileged and hagiographic lenses where the spiritual virtues of the subject are contrasted against the surrounding norm (Foot 2006,7).

Religious practice outside of early medieval minsters remains largely hidden and is a source of scholarly contention. In rejecting ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ representations of religion, Helen Foxhall Forbes suggests that intersections rather than dichotomies provide better models (2013, 13-14). There was syncretistic relationship between pagan and Christian belief, the condemnation of which was a preoccupation of Bede and Alcuin (Blair 2005, 179), and elements of both mutually informed the other (Blair 2005, 166-181; Carver 2010; Foxhall Forbes 2013, 57-8). The existence of a rear-guard of pagans maintaining a belief system in the face of Christian deprecation is, however, unsupported (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 57) and should instead be seen more in terms of the continuance of a world view that would allow for holy places and people, an unseen realm and a belief in the reality of apotropaic magic. Overall, understanding is ill-served by applying a Cartesian dualism, that is spheres of religious and everyday life, on people who saw no such division.

There is little certainty over how frequently the Mass was attended or how many people were baptised in the early period. Blair (2005, 70) suggests that even as early as Paulinus’ 620s mission to Northumbria, baptismal churches were normative, and the mass baptisms recorded in the River Glen at Yeavering and the Swale at Catterick were considered exceptional (EH II 14). While the episcopacy held rights over baptism (Foot 2006, 299; Cubitt 2009, 396), it and other sacraments could be administered by priests although confirmation was a firmly held episcopal prerogative (Foot 2006, 297-8). The balance between adult baptism and paedobaptism remains uncertain as does the degree to which there was a formal catechumenate. Even after baptism there was a need for the reinforcement of the basic tenets of Christian belief and practice (Foot 2006, 300).

From at least the 8<sup>th</sup> century, there seems to have been an expectation that everyone would attend a Sunday Mass (Gittos 2013, 12; Foxhall Forbes 2013, 46). In his *Letter to Ecgberht*, Bede commends daily reception of the Sacrament for the laity though fears that, in practice, it may be only three times a year around the feasts of Easter, Christmas and Epiphany. In exploring this, Foot (2006, 302-304) suggests that in practice it may have been even less and that strictures about the necessity for sexual purity limited sacramental participation so that the reality was that only the unmarried and those who were voluntarily celibate could take part. Definitions of the Eucharist were still fluid during the period and although present the theological discourses that would form the basis for the belief in transubstantiation had yet to solidify. The literal understanding of the moment of consecration bringing into being Christ's body and blood unseen was far from universally accepted (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 18-19). In a similar vein, the concept of purgatory received little formal definition (2013, 206 -12) where the emphasis remained on the *eschaton* and a last judgement. Nonetheless, the belief that the living could intervene on behalf of the dead was a fundamental core of the practice of the period and this could be achieved through prayer, the celebration of Masses and the giving of alms (Foot 2006, 202, 211, 317-8). This is particularly evident from monastic sites where recovery of memorial stones continues to reveal epigraphy requesting intercession for those whose names were recorded (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 246).

The early medieval preoccupation with the Last Judgment led to an emphasis on penance and reconciliation. Although doctrines concerning purgatory may be judged as ill-defined in comparison with later medieval developments (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 204-5), a significant emphasis was placed by the Church on the need to confess sin and receive absolution to avoid eternal damnation. The frequency of the exhortation for penitence throughout the written sources of the period may point to either a perceived underutilisation of the Sacrament or, conversely, to its normativity (Foot 2006, 305; Foxhall Forbes 2013, 46). In this way, it becomes problematic to suggest a frequency of confession for those outside of the monasteries, where it seems reasonable to assume regular penitential expression, though clearly it was in some way a facet of everyday life if not in practice, then in aspiration. Scholarly consensus is that most confessions were made privately and that public penance was relatively rare (Yorke 2006, 229; Gittos 2013, 267). Penitents were required to make a statement of Christian faith before a confession could begin, and this may have included



recitation of the incipit of the Nicene Creed (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 45). The priest was required to ensure it was understood not simply recited, with the attendant suggestion that it was taught by rote rather than implying any degree of literacy. In awarding the penance on which absolution was contingent, clergy could be assisted by penitentials which itemised both the sin and the actions required by the penitent (Jurasinski 2015).

Barbara Yorke (2006, 229) suggests that the notion of some form of penitential tariff was readily understood in early medieval society where the secular legal system was based on the notion of reparation. Moreover, the use of private confession and penance had the effect of hiding both an offender and contraventions of any societal norms from a wider audience and so lessening the likelihood of reprisals and feuds while providing increased social stability (2006, 229). A concern voiced at the 747 Council of Clofesho, however, was that some were able to avoid their penance altogether by the giving of alms or engaging others to fast and pray in lieu of the requirements placed upon them (Foot 2006, 305). In a similar way, elites were able to donate land to the Church to obviate their sins. Bede records King Oswiu founding a monastery at Gilling to atone for his ordering of the murder of King Oswine of Deira (d. 651) ‘in which prayers were to be offered daily to the Lord for the redemption of the souls of both kings, the murdered king and the one who ordered the murder’ (EH III 14). Such episodes begin to suggest a transactional understanding of confession and absolution with its attendant questions of whether this understanding was located purely in societal elites and whether such a view extended into other aspects of belief and practice. Allen Fratzon (2005) disputes this, however, seeing the penitentials as the opening round of a spiritual engagement that moves from the confessional rite into a domestic context as the penitent undertakes their penance and becomes a spiritual agent momentarily outside of the clerical sphere. It is here, he suggests, that early medieval lay spirituality is located (2005, 125).

## **CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

### **a. Introduction**

The following chapter aims to provide an overview of the methodology used in this study. It sets out the methodological and theoretic approaches used in qualitative paradigms, reviews the methods used in the analysis and gathering of data, describes the process of case study site selection and describes the ethical framework that was used.

### **b. Methodology**

The aim of this study is the investigation and analysis of discourses within the current presentation of Northumbrian Christianity. As these interpretative discourses are rooted within different forms of social performance, a qualitative rather than quantitative methodology was indicated (Holiday 2007, 5; Silverman 2017 & 2020). While there are mixed qualitative and quantitative approaches, the combination of the two models is contentious because of the mixing of two distinct, and potentially mutually distorting, paradigms (Ormston 2014). Initial observations at heritage sites suggested a spread of both historic and more recent interpretative approaches which acted to limit any generalised theorisation over how interpretative strategies might come about. In the absence of a testable theory, the qualitative approach was particularly congruent with the aim and objectives of this research in allowing for the reflexive development of foci, themes and methods in response to the emergence of data. In the canon of qualitative approaches, ethnographic methods are suggested as being particularly apposite in the investigation of interpretative discourses (Hunter 2012) and these were adopted in this research.

### c. Research Programme

The programme of research (Figure 2.1) began with a series of site visits to gain an appreciation of the field of study together with the intention of identifying potential case studies. This was then followed by an initial series of interviews with the aim of refining the research objectives, particularly that concerned with the presentation of belief being a discrete interpretative activity. Concurrently, the case study sites were confirmed and once the first phase of interviews was completed (p.61 below) the second research phase began where sites were visited and recorded, using an autoethnographic approach, and professionals directly involved in them interviewed. The semi-structured question sets used during these interviews were tailored by the reflexive processes applied following site visits. In all three phases the processes of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) were applied enabling the refinement of objectives and the development of theorisation, whilst allowing the reflexive adjustment of research perspectives which defines qualitative study.

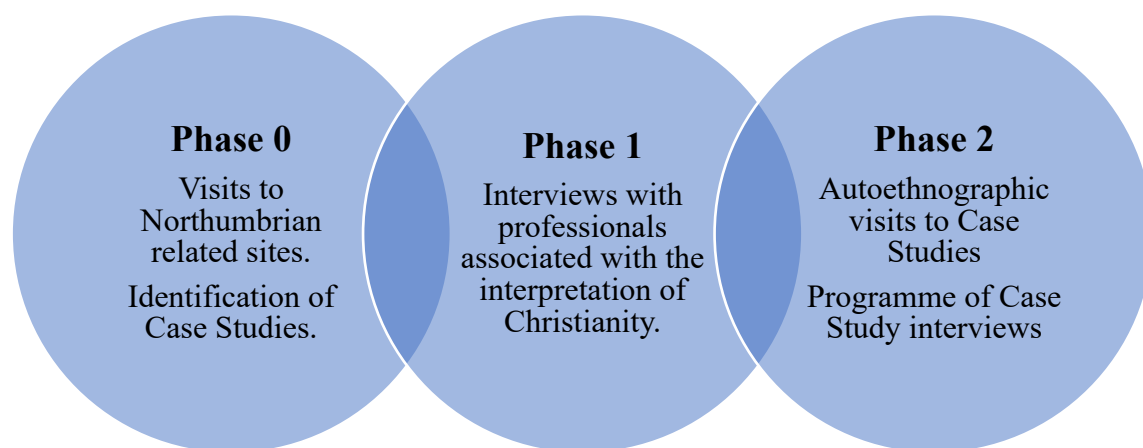


Figure 2.1 Programme of Research.

The principal axiom which informs this research is that many of the discourses underlying interpretative schemes can be identified through the schemes themselves. Such schemes are understood as the sum of the ways in which artefacts, places and monuments are presented, the environment in which this takes place and the meanings which are supported. In recognising this breadth, this research utilised a wide variety of data sources. These included both phases of interviews together with field notes and an extensive photographic record. These sources were further informed by the collection of guidebooks, and other literature, when they were available and where interactive interpretation was offered this was recorded in operation.

As the aim of the study was to describe discourses in the creation of interpretative schemes, researching audience responses to schemes was not considered a necessary element for the data set. While professionals and institutions were subsequently demonstrated to be reactive to the ways in which audiences engaged with their heritage places, it was this response and its subsequent outcomes rather than any stimulus which lay at the heart of the research aims. Although of considerable interest, the accuracy of the institutional understanding of visitors requires different methodological and analytical approaches, and as such was viewed as exceeding the resources available. The use of depth interviews (Schensul et al 1999, 67; Yeo et al 2014), for instance, may be particularly important if faith perspectives are to be accurately reported (e.g. Gutic et al 2010; Francis et al 2012). TripAdvisor and other web review sites can be seen as a resource efficient way of investigating audience responses, however reviews tend to coalesce around more ancillary issues (such as cafes, toilets, queues, lighting, font size etc.) rather than the creation of meaning (Alexander et al 2019). Furthermore, the cultural background of visitors may influence the content of any review whilst itself remaining occluded (Riva and Agostino 2022), making any judgement of significance problematic. This may be particularly pertinent when attempting to evaluate responses in regard to religious themes (Francis et al 2012). Overall, it was considered sufficient to note professionals' conceptualisation of their audiences and, as part of an autoethnographic methodology, to observe audience responses in the context of being a fellow visitor.

A particular consideration was the inclusion of web-based interpretations as a data source. All the case study sites were paralleled by some form of organisationally sponsored online presence. This varied considerably in terms of style, content and format and some were little more than indications of parking arrangements and opening hours. Where digital material had some interpretative function, its relationship to physical schemes was often unclear and this was compounded by revisions over the period of data collection between 2021 and 2024; during this time some sites ceased to function altogether. This was in some contrast to physical schemes which remained static throughout. Digital interpretations largely appeared centred around key artefacts, again in contrast to physical schemes which offered a wider contextualised assemblage. Overall, online interpretation appeared to support the assertion that ‘the present trend of digital heritage is predominantly descriptive’ (Rahaman 2018, 211) and so, while sometimes technically impressive, was didactic in approach. Links to online interpretation were noted at only one case study site and other than this no signposting to digital resources was recorded; only one interview respondent made any reference to an online presence during the interview cycle. While there is a burgeoning academic and professional interest in digital interpretation (e.g. Hylland et al 2025), online material did not appear to be a necessary component in the conceptualisation of even the most recent physical interpretative schemes nor the discourses around them. This suggested marginality may be supported by the report of only 19% of adults having engagement with digital heritage in contrast to 66% visiting heritage sites and places (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2022). Because of the lack of reference by interviewees or at heritage sites, the limited data from those sites and the unpredictable, yet evolving, nature of resources where they were present, it was decided not to view digital interpretation as a distinct interpretative category. Instead, it has been included in this work when it offers a commentary on physical interpretations and schemes which appear to be the dominant interpretative output. This is not, however, to obviate the need for dedicated research in the digital arena, rather to say that it stands outside of the scope of this study.

#### **d. The Selection of Case Study Sites**

Early in the research design process, it was noted that the number of potential case study sites easily exceeded the capacity for any in-depth investigation. Six sites were therefore selected

on the balance of three criteria: a judgement of relative importance (based on a combination of the nature of displayed artefacts, site archaeology and historical significance), the extent of interpretative schemes and site accessibility (both in terms of geographic accessibility and access to interviewees).

Of the six sites selected (Figure 2.1), three (Jarrow, Whitby and Whithorn) offered more than one research opportunity as they included different heritage venues and interpretive schemes and thus an opportunity to compare approaches. Although Kirkmadrine is some 30 miles by road from Whithorn (and considerably less by water) the sites share an intertwined biography (Forsyth and Maldonado 2013) and, as such, Kirkmadrine's inclusion was considered appropriate in this study. Together, Whithorn, Kirkmadrine and the National Museum of Scotland allowed for the investigation of sites with discourses outside of England while, its significant collection aside, Durham Cathedral afforded the opportunity to investigate an interpretative scheme located in a religious, rather than secular, context and one within a UNESCO World Heritage site (UNESCO 2025). Whitby and Lindisfarne played pivotal roles in the definition of Northumbrian Christianity and are frequently referenced in this perspective in tourist orientated literature while Jarrow has a distinct biography both in terms of the history of the site and the museological developments around it.

The result of this filtering process meant that a number of significant sites were not researched. The Bewcastle Cross is, for instance, noteworthy not only because of its imagery and degree of preservation but also because it is one of a handful of early medieval monuments that still sits within the landscape for which it was created (Cramp and Bailey 1988). The interpretation which is associated with it is, however, limited and Bewcastle is an isolated site. Perhaps the most significant Northumbrian absences are Ripon and Hexham, both connected with the life of Wilfred. At Ripon Cathedral there is very limited interpretative development of the history and materiality of the early medieval site, whereas at Hexham the relatively recent visitor centre was judged to offer fewer analytical opportunities than other places. Sites such as these do, however, offer the possibility of further research.

Case Study	Fieldwork Sites	Operated by	Period of Research Visits (and number of visits)
Durham Cathedral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Durham Open Treasure exhibition (see note below)</li> <li>Sites of shrines of Saints Cuthbert and Bede</li> </ul>	Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral	May - Sep 2022 (5)
Jarrow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Jarrow Hall Museum</li> <li>St Paul's Monastery</li> <li>St Paul's Church</li> </ul>	Groundwork South and North Tyneside  English Heritage  St Paul's Parochial Church Council	Jan- Sep 2022 (4)  Jan- Sep 2022 (4)  May and Sep 2022 (2)
Lindisfarne Priory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre</li> </ul>	English Heritage	Feb- Sep 2023 (4)
National Museum of Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early People Gallery</li> <li>Kingdom of the Scots Gallery</li> </ul>	National Museum of Scotland	Feb- Oct 2023 (5)
Whitby Abbey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Whitby Abbey Visitor Centre</li> <li>Whitby Town Museum</li> </ul>	English Heritage  Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society	Feb- Sept 2022 (4)  Apr- Sept 2022 (2)
Whithorn	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Whithorn Trust Visitor Centre</li> <li>Whithorn Priory Museum</li> <li>Kirkmadrine Church</li> </ul>	The Whithorn Trust  Historic Environment Scotland  Historic Environment Scotland	May- Sep 2022 (4)  May- Sep 2022 (4)  Sep 2022 (2)

Table 2.2 Case Study Sites, Dates and Number of Research Visits.

Note: The Open Treasure exhibition was renamed Durham Cathedral Museum in April 2022 (Hodgson 2022). During the period of research, the two terms were often used interchangeably, notably by interviewees. Open Treasure is used in this work to reflect the title originally used at the inception of the still extant interpretative scheme.

## **e. Research Methods**

### **1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

The wide variety of types of data generated during the research required methods which could successfully incorporate different data sets and allow discourses to be observed. The overarching analytical approach used was Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2002<sup>1</sup> & 2022) which may be broadly typified as a process ‘which involves discovering, interpreting and reporting patterns and clusters of meaning within data’ (Spencer et al 2013, 271). It is understood as having a ‘structural’ orientation (2013, 272) in that it is concerned with the illumination of social worlds where meaning is sought not in the data itself but rather what it means. This may be held to be in contrast with constructionist forms where the ‘focus [is] on language and the construction or structure of talk, text and interaction – what the text *does*’ (2013, 272). Structural approaches include thematic analysis and grounded theory (Birks and Mills 2015) together with discourse and narrative analysis and actor-network theory (Silverman 2017, 142-3).

Braun and Clarke (2020) suggest three distinct categories of thematic analysis differentiated by the way in which themes are developed, especially the point at which they begin to solidify. Of these, the reflexive thematic approach was judged to be particularly apposite in this study because it allows for the analysis of data in disparate formats (it should not be seen as a methodology with rigid rules but rather as a process with guidelines) and a reflexive and visible researcher (Braun and Clarke 2020 & 2022). This latter point was congruent with the autoethnographic method also used and described below. Making the researcher visible and



placing reflexion at the heart of the thematic process is an essential element of the assurance of the quality of the analysis (2022, 268-271). The subjectivity brought by the researcher is not something to be shackled or constrained, rather something which at its best makes the analysis ‘compelling, insightful, thoughtful, rich, complex, deep [and] nuanced’ (2022, 8).

The Reflexive Thematic Process has six steps (Figure 2.2) which begins with an immersion in the dataset. From this, codes are then identified which in turn are refined into initial themes. These themes are, through a two-stage process, developed, reviewed and refined leading to the final sixth stage of writing up. These six steps have at their heart reflexive practice where the researcher, through a variety of mediums, records their own thoughts and feelings as the data unfolds and which acts to support the development of the analysis. The process should not be seen as linear (Braun and Clarke 2022, 36) but rather discursive as codes and themes are refined and adjusted: ‘that often involves going sideways and backwards, and even round in circles as you move from the start towards the end of the process. Knowing that is important, because it’s not only part of the process, it’s part of doing thematic analysis well’ (2020, 36).

Thematic analysis has received several criticisms, primarily that it should be seen more as a generic method which has an applicability in other traditions such as grounded theory and content analysis rather than having epistemic legitimacy in its own right (Spencer et al 2014, 271). Advocates of the approach reject this critique observing that what is present is a theoretical flexibility which, axiomatically, demands a significant attention to theory from the outset (Braun and Clarke 2006 & 2022). As part of the thematic process these theoretical assumptions must be acknowledged and become a source of reflection (2022, 8).

The qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) NVivo 12 was used as an aid in the coding process. While advocated by some qualitative researchers (Woods et al 2016; Jackson et al 2018), others are more cautious observing that QDAS inevitably introduces implicit assumptions through its internal structures and, in the case of thematic analysis at least, distances the researcher from the data (Braun and Clarke 2022, 66-67). However, QDAS do provide a mechanism for handling large and varied data sets and act as a convenient database

for the interrogation of texts. After some reflection none of the higher-level functions were employed in NVivo 12 and the software was used to facilitate data handling. The search and graphic creation functions available in the software were used as part of the reflexive process, notably in the creation of word clouds and, overall, this was felt to be congruent with, and beneficial to, the thematic approach.

The application of the thematic process led to the initial identification of ninety-one themes and sub-themes. These included the hagiographical, the materiality of religion, the creation of national and regional identity and the practice of interpretation. Reflexive practice facilitated further refinement, bringing together themes and limiting duplications, eventually leading to the creation of four overarching themes, namely the discourses which surround interpretation (questions of professional background, interpretative practices, authenticity etc), discourses which lead the material and historical interpretation of the Northumbrian Church (such as the normativity of Benedictine forms of monasticism and a privileging of aesthetic meanings), discourses in the interpretation of the experience of early medieval belief and discourses which inform modern identities. These four themes are each reported on in detail in chapters 4-7.

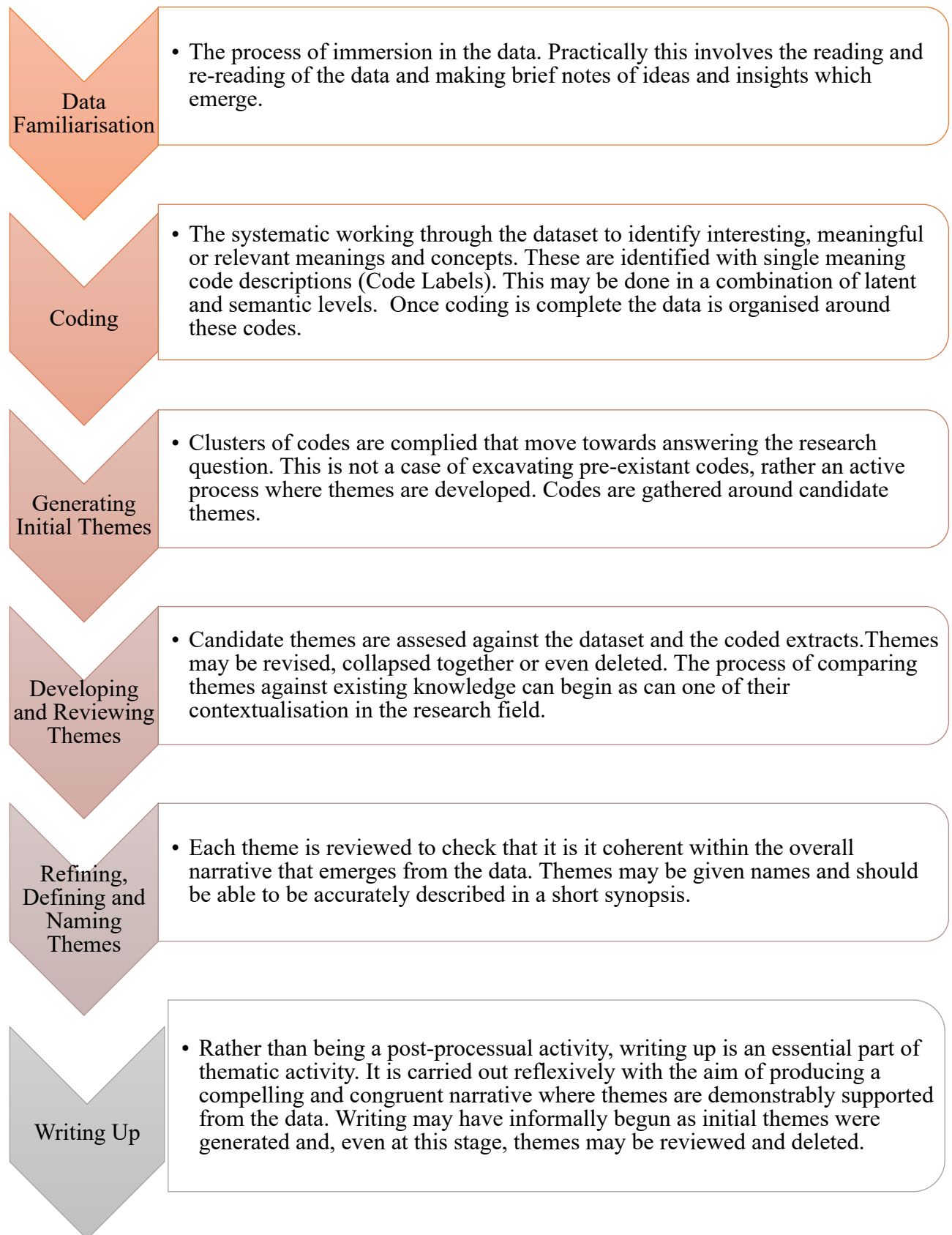


Figure 2.2 The Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process after Braun and Clarke (2022, 35-36).

## 2. Interviews.

Interviews in both Phase One and Phase Two of the research were heuristic and semi-structured (Schensul et al 1999). They were understood as ‘depth interviews’ (Oppenheim 1992, 67; also Yeo et al 2014) where ‘the job of the interviewer is not that of data collection but ideas collection’ (Oppenheim 1992, 67). The second phase of interviews were directed by site visits and therefore had a ‘hidden agenda, a handful of headings or topics around which they will seek to direct the interview as unobtrusively as possible’ (Oppenheim 1992, 67).

The first three interviewees in the initial interview phase were approached on the basis of their having published work in the field of the interpretation of Northumbrian religious heritage. Subsequent participants were invited to engage through snowballing (Emerson 2015; Marcus et al 2017), that is they were approached on the recommendation of other interviewees, and this process continued until no new names were suggested at which point the second phase of interview began. Snowballing raises some concerns over the likelihood of self-selection in any interview sample but this was viewed as being somewhat inevitable because of the limited pool of professionals working in the field. Snowballing was also used to a lesser extent during the second phase of interviews, though most approaches were made because of the relationship participants had with interpretative schemes. There was a certain degree of crossover between the two interview programmes where three respondents were interviewed as part of both phases. This occurred where professionals were involved in more than one site (second phase interviews were conducted in regard to one site only) or when they were suggested as respondees as part of a snowballing process. This was judged, however, to be appropriate and acted to enable discourses to be observed from differing perspectives. Such entanglements are seen as adding to the richness of the thematic process (Braun and Clarke 2022)

Interviews were conducted using the principles of responsive interviewing (Rubin and Rubin 2012; Yeo et al 2014, 18) where any commodification of participants is rejected (Kvale and Brinkman 2009) in favour of the development of trust and the levelling of power structures. Respondees were invited to participate with the expectation that interviews would be an hour

in length, although in the event all but two interviews exceeded this by mutual agreement with median time of an hour and twenty minutes. The longest interview lasted for over two hours whilst the shortest was forty-five minutes. Transcripts ranged from eight to fifteen thousand words in length and in total twenty-four interviews were conducted. Several participants continued conversations after the researcher had brought the interview to an end, and subsequently over following weeks, although these elements were neither recorded nor included in the dataset as they fell outside the consents which had been received. Some interviewees introduced relevant material in this unrecorded period which they did not wish to be included in the study.

Interviewees were initially approached by email which was then followed up by a confirmatory email to which was attached a consent form, an information sheet outlining the research aims and a privacy notice explaining how data would be handled, stored and ultimately disposed of. Interviews began with a verbal check of continued consent and the opportunity to either ask questions at that point or withdraw. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were given a debriefing sheet confirming anonymity and inviting any further reflections. Copies of the consent form, the information sheet, the privacy notice and the debriefing sheet are attached to this thesis as Appendix 1.

Phase One interviews were semi-structured and the schedule of questions is attached in Appendix 2. In accordance with the reflexive methodology of this study, these questions were slightly modified over the period of interviews, in particular through the introduction of a question concerning the role of design agencies in the creative process after this had arisen as a point of interest in the first two interviews. The second phase of interviews also followed a broad structure, although were more specifically tailored to the interpretative schemes present at individual sites. These interviews took place only after at least one site visit had been conducted and so were informed by the reflexive process. An indicative question set is attached in Appendix 2.

### 3. Autoethnography

Autoethnography has a variety of different expressions (Ellis et al. 2011) with a broad differentiation between a more dominant emotive autoethnographic approach and analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006). Emotive autoethnography is located within the emotional reaction of the researcher to the field of research while analytic autoethnography is concerned with theorisation and is distinguished through five characteristics:

The five key features of analytic autoethnography that I propose include (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis amongst which is a dialogue with 'informants beyond self' and a commitment to an analytic agenda. Combined, these two allow for the use of data to inform purely internal reflection in order to develop theory. (Anderson 2006, 378)

The analytical autoethnographic approach was utilised in this research because as a method it allows for researcher visibility whilst enabling an observation of the agency of artefacts and places (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Tilley 2007). Furthermore, it supports the process of theorisation necessary to meet this study's research aim and objectives. As a reflexive method it is highly compatible with thematic analysis, supporting methodological congruence (Mayan 2009, 32; Ormston et al. 2014, 20)

Several criticisms are levelled against analytical autoethnography, notably from emotive ethnographers who are suspicious of what appears to be the assertion of realism into what they maintain should be conceptualised and practiced as an art form (Anderson 2006; Denzin 2006). Other scholars claim that autoethnography is intrinsically subjective and lacks rigor and is thus 'self-indulgent and narcissistic' (Mayan, 2009, 41). Autoethnographers refute such criticism on the basis that their critics fail to grasp the true nature of autoethnography which 'as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional' (Ellis et al. 2011). While the substance of these discussion is somewhat outside of the scope of this thesis the

experience of using autoethnographic processes suggested that they added richness to the dataset and its subsequent analysis. In the research design it had been anticipated that this contribution would be largely pragmatic and material, enabling the theorisation of the interrelation of displays and interpretative schemes. In practice, however, autoethnographic data seemed to speak more to an entanglement of values, engagements and belongings.

Field notes, supported by photographs, were created during site visits and followed by further reflexive entries (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Where these notes and entries are recorded in this thesis they italicised to differentiate them from interview excerpts. Such notes and entries are written in the first person to allow researcher visibility (Davies 2012; Logan 2012; Zhou and Hall 2018).

#### **f. Biographical Note**

Both the analytical autoethnographic approach (Anderson 2006) and the Reflexive Thematic Analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2006, 20021 & 2022) consider researcher visibility to be an important factor in ensuring the validity of any research conclusions.

Prior to engaging in this study, this researcher had served as a Church of England priest for over thirty years, working primarily in military and educational chaplaincy. In this context he has been trained in pastoral counselling and listening skills. He holds a first degree in theology, a higher degree in religious education and has published in peer-reviewed journals on the formation of values within faith-sector secondary schools. He has been engaged in community archaeology for over twenty years and was taught field work and surveying principles at the University of Sussex before the closure of their extra-mural programme. More recently, the opportunity to formally engage with the study of parish church history and architecture at the University of York led to a master's degree in Heritage and Interpretation at the University of Leicester with a dissertation analysing the relationships between parish churches, tourism and local communities. He would, however, not consider himself as an archaeologist nor a heritage professional. Rather, he is a user of heritage places, a consumer of interpretative performances and an observer of the body of visitors of which he is part.

### **g. Validity and Reliability**

The question of validity (Lewis et al 2014, 356- 359; Silverman 2017, 384-396) is a key consideration in the conclusions which are drawn from qualitative research. It has been addressed in this study through the adoption of the Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach where quality is maintained through adherence to the reflexive process and ensuring the visibility of the researcher throughout. The process defends conclusions from a charge of anecdotalism (Silverman 2017, 385) in a similar way to comprehensive data treatment (Mehan 2013, 20), where any generalization cannot be drawn until it can accommodate all relevant data, and the constant comparative method (Silverman 2017, 389-391) in which hypotheses are developed from packets of data and then tested against other cases. In support of validity, broad interview excerpts have been reproduced in this thesis to allow a judgement to be made on their subsequent interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2022, 133) and to facilitate researcher visibility.

Reliability is a problematic concept in qualitative research where replicability is usually prejudiced by an inability to recreate the context in which the original research was conducted. This does not, however, absolve a need for the consideration of reliability, especially if any conclusions are expected to influence outcomes away from the field in which data has been collected (Lewis et al 2014 356). In this way, the concept of reliability becomes the ‘confidence that the internal elements, dimensions, factors, sectors and so on, found within the original data, would occur outside the study population or among a different version of the study sample’ (2014, 256) and this definition has been adopted in this study.

### **h. Ethical Considerations.**

The study was conducted in accordance with the 2021 ethical guidelines produced by the University of Durham. The research design was presented to, and approved, by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Archaeology in the spring of 2022.



As noted above, informed consent was received from all participants prior to interview who, whilst not being asked to be representative of any institution or organisation, were made aware that their comments could anonymously be linked to roles and places if contextual clarity required it. This consent was verbally reestablished at the commencement of interviews before recording began and copies of the information provided to participants are included in Appendix 1. Overall, interview material was used with a high regard to the principle that participants should be protected from any unintended harm. No special access was requested or received at any of the case study sites other than to facilitate the photography of the interpretations associated with artefacts displayed in the Great Kitchen in Durham Cathedral. All interpretative material lies in the public domain. In accordance with University policy all recordings were deleted following transcription and consent forms and any material that might be used to identify participants destroyed following submission of this thesis.

A particular consideration was whether a blanket anonymity should be applied to interviewees, a feature which was ultimately enacted. The rationale behind this question lay in the anticipation of participants introducing their own religious beliefs, a protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act, whilst being interviewed. Questions around personal belief were not part of the research design and were not asked during interview; however, the experience of a reciprocal interview approach appeared to encourage such disclosures and as such the decision was vindicated. Overwhelmingly, the contents of the interviews were uncontroversial but on several occasions comments were recorded that could potentially be injurious to the participants concerned. While transcripts could be redacted this would incur a considerable loss of meaning and, regardless, the specificities contained in the written interview record were judged to leave open the possibility of individuals being identified through an informed reading of the whole. It was therefore decided not to attach interview transcripts to this thesis in order to maintain participant anonymity.

In this thesis participants are recorded by a letter, indicating whether the interview took place in the first (A) or second (B) phase, followed by a randomly applied two-digit number (e.g. A01, B23).

## **CHAPTER THREE: THE CASE STUDY SITES**

### **a. Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the six case study sites and institutions that inform the core of the data gathered during this research. Four of the sites, Jarrow, Lindisfarne, Whitby and Whithorn, are the sites of significant early Northumbrian monasteries. They share common characteristics, not least in that successor medieval buildings are now the most visible features of the sites and that they have been subject to programmes of excavation and research. The fabric of the fifth site, Durham Cathedral, whilst falling outside of the period of the ‘Golden Age’ contains some of its most significant and iconic artefacts. The sixth case study, the National Museum of Scotland, displays a relatively small number of Northumbrian artefacts and so is not necessarily significant in terms of the size of its collection. Where significance does lie, however, is the interpretations it offers which are located in discourses concerned with identity and belief in a national, rather than site specific, context.

Whilst Lindisfarne is chronologically the earliest Northumbrian monastic site, the case studies have entangled biographies and so are listed alphabetically. Each portrayal begins with a description of background, that is a review of the historical significance of the site, the sources which describe it and some of the detail which any interpretation might reflect. Significant archaeological investigations are then briefly described together with any noteworthy conclusions which arise from them. These form the subsequent basis of many elements of the related interpretative schemes and, other than the largely unexcavated Durham Cathedral and the gathered collections of the National Museum of Scotland, the influence of excavated materiality on those schemes was a significant research objective. Finally, the interpretation available at each site is described as it was found during the period of research between July 2022 and September 2023.

## **b. Durham Cathedral**

### **1. Background**

The foundation myth of the early medieval monastery at Durham is uncritically rehearsed by a wide spectrum of authors, not least those who are engaged in popular presentations of a regional Christian heritage centred in the northeast of England and derived from Northumbrian roots (e.g. Adam 2006; Wakefield 2009; Sadgrove 2013). This received tradition is drawn largely from later medieval accounts, especially that of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Symeon of Durham (d. circa 1128), a member of the Benedictine community which inherited monastery at Durham in 1083 (HCD LXII). In Symeon's narrative, Danish incursion brought about the abandonment of the monastery at Lindisfarne in 875 and the community carried its treasures and relics across northern England for seven years looking for a safe refuge from Viking attack. At the end of this peregrination, the monks settled at Chester-le-Street with a final, and permanent, move to Durham in 995. Key amongst the treasures carried were the relics of Cuthbert who, on his first translation at Lindisfarne in 698, had been found uncorrupted (EH IV 30). This was interpreted as a sign of the power and status of the saint and the physicality of Cuthbert's remains would continue to be a key factor in reinforcing the supernatural efficacy of his cult up to the Reformation.

Whilst this foundation myth may have wide popular currency it may be a synthesis from different sources (Rozier 2020, 32-36). Viking raids destabilised monastic life but were not necessarily an existential threat (Gittos 2011, 830) and excavation on Lindisfarne has suggested that the monastery continued to operate beyond the supposed 9th century abandonment of the site (Jackson et al 2022). Several authors have observed that the peregrinatory route described by Symeon across Northumbria corresponds to known land holdings of the Lindisfarne community and so the movement of Cuthbert's remains may have been a monastic assertion of property title where his relics acted as a material expression of the agency of saintly apotropaic protection and ownership (Bonner 1989, 388; Rollason 1989, 207-208; Rozier 2020, 36-37). Settlement away from Lindisfarne may reflect a need to relocate more centrally within the spread of monastic landholding (Cambridge 1989, 385) or point to later political and defensive realities (Rozier 2020, 69 -71). It may be that a

privileging of Symeon's 12<sup>th</sup> century account has meant that other sources which describe the community move as being one to Norham, from where the monastery at Durham was directly founded, have been overlooked (McGuigan (2019). Overall, the traditional account of the peregrination, despite its repetition, may be somewhat insecure.

Little can be deduced about the fabric of the Northumbrian monastery as the Norman Cathedral and its claustral range sit on its site (Cramp 1984). Cuthbert's still reportedly incorrupt remains were translated in 1104 to this newly built Benedictine monastery (Rozier 2020, 100- 101) and the Black Monks inherited extensive estates as well as treasures carried from Lindisfarne. In 1104 the 8th century copy of St John's Gospel, now known as the St Cuthbert Gospel, was annotated at Durham with a description of its discovery in the saint's tomb during the translation to the new shrine (British Library 2022). It is likely to have been produced in Wearmouth-Jarrow and is unique in retaining its original leather binding. The presence of this Gospel offers a commentary not only on a cycle of exposition of the uncorrupted body but also on the deposition of offerings.

The shrine of St Cuthbert continued to be a significant focus of pilgrimage throughout the Middle Ages until its suppression and dismantling in 1537. When the tomb was opened, the body was found 'lying whole, incorrupt, with his face bare, and his beard as it had a fortnight's growth, and all his vestments upon him' (Hegge 1625, 75 cited in McCombe 2014, 384). The shrine was dismantled and the cadaver placed in a vestry until its re-internment in the feretory some five years later (McCombe 2014, 384). This was a course of action which ran contrary to the normal Henrican practice of hiding or scattering the bones of saints, undertaken with the dual intent of both preventing the re-emergence of any cult and disrupting any notion of apotropaic agency through the material destruction of the coherence of relics (Finucane 1977, 207). The tomb was next opened in 1827 and, during a hurried and somewhat chaotic excavation, skeletal remains were exhumed and a variety of artefacts recovered. This disinterment has been the source of some scholarly interest (Bailey 1989, 231-232; McCombe 2014; Bailey and Cambridge 2015) being characterised as response to a newly emancipated, and increasingly confident, Roman Catholicism. Amongst the artefacts

recovered were the iconic pectoral cross, a silver shrouded portable altar,<sup>9</sup> a liturgical comb,<sup>10</sup> the stole<sup>11</sup> and maniple<sup>12</sup> given by King Athelstan in 937 (Rollason 1989, 146) together with a large quantity of textile and wooden fragments, including those of the decorated 7th century inner coffin (Bailey 1989).

The cult of Cuthbert was also paralleled by that of Bede. Symeon of Durham records the 11th century sacrist of Cuthbert's shrine, Elfred, recovering the skeletal remains of Bede from the site of the monastery at Jarrow and them being placed in a linen bag in Cuthbert's coffin (HCD XLIIL), an account which has received general acceptance (Story and Bailey 2015, 341 and 343). The relics were placed in their own reliquary following the 1104 translation of Cuthbert's remains and enshrined in the Galilee Chapel which became itself a site of pilgrimage. Bede's shrine was dismantled during the Reformation and the tomb re-opened in 1830. Although in a poor state of preservation, the bones had been anatomically arranged, and several casts were taken of the skull (Story and Bailey 2015, 325-331). No grave goods are recorded as having been found.

## **2. Interpretation**

A variety of locations in the claustral buildings have hosted the display of artefacts from the cathedral collection, including those excavated in 1827. In 2017 the Open Treasure exhibition was opened where the medieval Monk's Dormitory and Great Kitchen were connected to provide accessible display space (Lowis 2017). The visitor enters the Cloister from the main body of the Cathedral and from there ascends by a lift or stairs to the Monk's Dormitory. After passing by a welcome desk the first displays are those of worked stone, arranged chronologically from the Roman through to the later early medieval periods. The stones include several replicas which are identified on the relevant interpretative panels. This

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<sup>9</sup> Durham Cathedral DURCL: 3.14.1

<sup>10</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL: 18.9.1

<sup>11</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL:5.4.59

<sup>12</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL 5.4.60

scheme is supported by AV screens which allow self-selection of two- and three-minute video clips which amplify the themes of the display. The remainder of the Monk's Dormitory is taken up by displays concerning the later medieval priory together with a segment of the modern cathedral library and the visitor moves through these spaces to an airlock of glass doors and into a display area used primarily for the exhibition of documents and temporary exhibitions. From here, two more doors lead to a lift and staircase which then leads the visitor back down to a corridor to the door of the Great Kitchen. The Great Kitchen, the former monastic kitchen, is a large octagonally shaped room with a vaulted roof. With its lancet windows blocked out and dimly lit, it invites the visitor into a discrete space reminiscent of candle lit churches, although in this it seems to serve more as a space in which to display the Cathedral's greatest treasures rather than being a significant place in its own right. The line of sight from the doorway is primarily towards the case containing Cuthbert's 7<sup>th</sup> century inner coffin; the visitor views its end through a lancet shape in the case reinforcing, perhaps, an ecclesiastical theme. Behind it another case displays the stole, maniple and other textiles removed in 1827 and to the right of the coffin two further cases – one containing the liturgical comb and portable altar and the other the Cuthbert cross, all three displayed at eye level. To the left of the coffin are two other cases containing two other iconic treasures of the cathedral. One displays the iconic 12<sup>th</sup> century sanctuary ring,<sup>13</sup> the other the 13<sup>th</sup> century Conyers Falchion,<sup>14</sup> a sword symbolising the authority of the Prince Bishops of Durham. The exit from the Kitchen lies opposite the entrance and going through it the route twists along a passageway before returning through a door into the Cloister.

## **c. Jarrow**

### **1. Background**

The site of the monastic house at Jarrow overlooks 'what was once one of the finest harbours in the north of England' (Wood 2010, 91) on the south bank of the River Tyne. The

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<sup>13</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL: 2.17.1

<sup>14</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL: 18.2.1

monastery was founded in the highly Romanized landscape of the eastern edge of the northern militarised zone, in line of sight of the fort of Arbeia at South Shields which itself may have been a royal palace in the middle Saxon period (Wood 2010, 96). Excavation has demonstrated significant re-use of Roman stone in the Anglian buildings which, together with several small finds, reinforce the place of the monastery in a wider landscape where romanitas was powerfully evident (Cramp 2005, 26–27; Turner, Semple and Turner 2013, 87–94).

The main written sources describing the foundation of the Jarrow monastery are found in Bede's *Lives of the Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow* (hereafter HAB), written between 716 and 735, and the anonymous *History of Abbot Ceolfrith*, (HAA), written around 755 (Farmer 1998, 213). They describe a single monastery on two sites: the first at Wearmouth, and the second on the Tyne at Jarrow, both with associated estates. The founding abbot, Benedict Biscop (d. 690) received an initial grant of land at Wearmouth from King Egfrid (d. 685) in 672/3 (HAB 4, HAA 7) and building began in 674 followed by a further grant of land at Jarrow in 681 (HAA 11). The Church of St Peter was dedicated at Wearmouth in 675/6 (HAA 9) and that of St Paul at Jarrow in 685 (HAA 12), the dedication stone of which survives in the extant building (Cramp 2005, 365–366). Bede places himself in the chronology of this dual monastery, describing his membership of the community from the age of seven (EH V 24). He died at Jarrow in 735 where he was subsequently buried.

Bede records that Biscop was born in 628 of a noble Northumbrian family and as a thegn renounced his estate and secular life (HAB 1) to follow a religious vocation. He travelled to Rome on five occasions, being tonsured on the second of these pilgrimages in around 667. He was directed to accompany Theodore, who had been consecrated as Archbishop of Canterbury, from Rome to Kent in 669 and was subsequently made Abbot of the monastery of SS Peter and Paul in Canterbury. He renounced this abbacy two years later to found his own monastery in Wessex. The creation of this new foundation was, however, thwarted by the death of his patron, King Cenwalh (d. 672), and Biscop returned to Northumbria where King Egfrid gave him seventy hides of land at Wearmouth for a new monastery. The

community being ‘settled to the ordered life of the Rule’ (HAB 6), Biscop journeyed again to Rome in 679 returning to Northumbria for 681 and the grant of land at Jarrow.

Concurrently, Biscop’s relative Ceolfrith (d.716) had entered monastic life and Biscop negotiated his release from the monastery at Ripon so that he could be amongst the founders at Wearmouth. Ceolfrith accompanied Biscop on his 679 journey to Rome and was appointed as the head of the new monastery at Jarrow while Eosterwine, Biscop’s cousin, became Abbot of Wearmouth. Bede goes to considerable lengths to stress that Wearmouth and Jarrow were not separate communities, rather a single monastic house in two locations (HAB 7). The early relationship between Wearmouth and Jarrow may not, however, have been one of equals under one rule and the Jarrow site may have been initially conceived as a royal foundation intimately connected with a royal palace at Arbeia (Wood 2010). Farmer (1998, 31) suggests that the presence of three abbots should be understood as being analogous to the later medieval notion of ‘coadjutor’ abbots, monks appointed to help an absent abbot-founder with the running and oversight of a complex community. Bede defends the practice as being apostolic (HAB 7).

Eosterwine died in 685/6 (HAA 13; HAB 10) whilst Biscop was away on his fifth visit to Rome and the community elected Sigfrith as his successor. Sigfrith died in 688 and Ceolfrith assumed a coadjutor role for both monasteries and, on Biscop’s death, became sole abbot of both houses in 689. Of note during his abbacy is the production of three complete Bibles, one each for the two monasteries while the third would become a gift for the Pope (HAA 20). This survives as the *Codex Amiatinus*<sup>15</sup> (Farmer 1998, 34–35; Turner, Sempole and Turner 2013, 3–4) and the extensive resources required to produce these three books speaks to the relative sophistication of the two monasteries (Farr, 1999).

Bede may have been present at Biscop’s death (HAB 11-13; Farmer 1998, 37) and his first-hand account is unique in that it allows him to write about the monasteries in considerable detail and with personal knowledge of its abbots. This adds significance to some of the detail Bede provides, not least regarding the monastic rule and the election of abbots. Bede records

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<sup>15</sup> Florence: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana MS Amiat. 1



Biscop's reluctance to allow his 'brother in the flesh' (HAB 11) to succeed him as abbot, which is suggestive of monasteries being regarded as familial property and subject to rights of inheritance (Wood 2010, 88). Biscop circumvented the question of inheritance through two mechanisms; firstly, by acquiring Papal indult to ensure that the ownership of the monastic estates was invested in the community (HAB 6) and, secondly, by requiring the monastery to choose its abbots from amongst its own brethren according to the Rule of St Benedict (HAB 11). This may shed light on Bede's later vehemence towards the practice of monastic inheritance in his *Letter to Egbert*, though it also poses a question as to what the Wearmouth-Jarrow rule consisted of if it was not that of St Benedict. Bede records Biscop describing how the ordinances that he laid down to govern the community were derived from those of seventeen monasteries that he had visited on his pilgrimages (HAB 11) opening a speculative door on the relationships between the rules of monasteries both in Northumbria and further afield (Foot 2006, 52).

The detail contained in Bede's *Lives of the Abbots* and the anonymous *History of Abbot Ceolfrith* enables a developed reconstruction of the materiality and lived experience of life at Jarrow. The churches were highly decorated by pictures, which might be interpreted as icons, displayed thematically on the walls and on a structure which may be analogous to a contemporary Orthodox *iconostasis* (HAB 6, 9). Bede describes these as being aids in the faith of those who were illiterate (HAB 6), while the importance of the monastic library is continuously reinforced as is the breadth of the titles it contained and their necessity in maintaining the religious life of the two houses. Worship was structured around the pattern of the offices where the psalms were recited antiphonally, the antiphons themselves sung, and incense (presumably a precious commodity) offered. Priests said a daily Mass and some of the monks recited the whole Psalmody once if not twice each day as a personal devotion. On Ceolfrith's resignation from office the number of monks of the joint monastery stood at around 600 (HAA 33; HAB 17) a figure, which if transposed onto the size of the churches and dormitories as excavated, suggests either cramped accommodation or some dispersal of the community across its estates. This may have been to provide pastoral care (Cramp 2005, 35) although equally it may be that later understandings of corporate worship, accommodation and stability are being mistakenly transferred onto the monastic community.

Bede died in 735 and was buried at Jarrow. Later 8<sup>th</sup> century references to silk being provided for his relics (Story and Bailey 2015, 342-343) suggest a subsequent translation and the development of a saintly cult. His remains were attributed with at least one miraculous cure (Hunter Blair 1976, 136; McClure and Collins 1994, XV). Both Wearmouth and Jarrow were raided during the earliest phases of the Viking incursion, with a probable sacking of Jarrow in 794 and monastic abandonment in 869-70 (Cramp 2005, 34). Unlike the Community of St Cuthbert at Lindisfarne the Wearmouth-Jarrow community seems to have dissolved entirely. Monastic life on the site was re-established in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Jarrow becoming a cell of the now Benedictine Durham community and elements of the fabric of the early medieval church were absorbed into the monastic church. At the Dissolution the church was redesignated for parochial use and the medieval monastic precincts converted to provide accommodation and other buildings (Cramp 2005, 40–42). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a large house (Jarrow Hall) was built 175m to the north of the church and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century a small area of terraced housing was built to the east. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a gradual retreat from residential use and the buildings in the precinct next to the church had been removed by 1955. In 1956 the site passed into state Guardianship (Cramp 2005, 42).

## **2. Archaeology**

Jarrow has been subject to a series of excavations, the most comprehensive being between 1963 and 1978 (Cramp, 2005). Amongst the more recent investigations of the site was that conducted in support of an ultimately unsuccessful bid for World Heritage Site status (Turner, Semple and Turner 2013). This included extensive geophysical survey and the recording of the extant fabric of the church using laser techniques.

Cramp's series of excavations revealed two early contemporaneous Northumbrian churches arranged on an east-west axis on the site of the current parish church (2005). The presence of multiple churches on the site, together with their axial arrangement, may be a reflection of Merovingian practice or relate to a localised Northumbrian custom for the arrangement of ritual buildings (Blair 2005, 199–201; Gittos 2013, 64–73). Any liturgical or practical reasons for aligned multiple churches remains speculative.

Outside of the church, two of the buildings excavated were from the earliest phase of the Anglian monastery and were partly constructed from re-purposed Roman materials (Cramp 2005, 189-201). One appeared to have been separated into two rooms, in the larger of which a column base had been set into the floor possibly acting as the base of a reading desk. The second was interpreted as a large hall with two smaller rooms adjacent, one being a living space and the other a chapel (Cramp 2005, 201-207). Artefacts recovered included a stylus, a scribe and a plumb bob, all suggestive of writing and drawing. A third building from this early phase was judged to be of slightly later construction and may have had an industrial function, although its proximity to the presumed waterborne point of entry onto the site also suggested use as a guesthouse (Cramp 2005, 229).

### **3. Interpretation**

The modern site at Jarrow offers three points of interpretation. Firstly, the site of the monastery itself, with the extant remains of the medieval priory, has a series of English Heritage interpretative boards. Of 21<sup>st</sup> century date, they appear to generally follow the interpretation of the site offered by Cramp (2005). The wall lines of the early monastery are defined by lines of paving amongst the standing medieval remains.

A second interpretation is offered in St Paul's church itself. This draws attention to the dedication stone and some early medieval features together with various pieces of worked stone which has been recovered from the site. This display is of uncertain date, although the design, in terms of fonts and logos, suggests it is contemporaneous with the World Heritage Site bid.

The third interpretation is offered by the Jarrow Hall Museum. After the completion in 1978 of Cramp's excavations the 'Bede Monastery Museum' was opened by the St Paul's Jarrow Development Trust at Jarrow Hall (Cramp 1980, 3). This was replaced by a purpose-built museum, Bede's World, in 2000 (Fowler and Harte, 1999, 93). Ultimately this museum was

to fail (Benson and Cremin 2019, 29–30) to be rescued in 2016 by the charity Groundwork South and North Tyneside in partnership with South Tyneside Council (Groundwork South and North Tyneside, 2022). The museum remains housed in its purpose-built accommodation and externally includes reconstructions of early medieval structures and farming practice. At least three interpretative schemes are observable in the main exhibition space, the majority of which appears to relate to the original 2000 scheme. The collection on display contains relatively few early medieval artefacts, a reflection of the finds recovered from the site, and relies heavily on illustrations, reproductions and facsimiles. A notable exception to this is a display of fragments of coloured glass, lit from behind and so allowing the viewer to appreciate something of the vibrancy of the windows from which they came.

#### **d. Lindisfarne**

##### **1. Background**

Of all the religious sites of early medieval Northumbria, none is perhaps so prominent in the popular imagination than the island of Lindisfarne. Wistfully gazed at from passing train windows, it is a site of convergence for modern pilgrimage and tourism where the severing of the causeway to the mainland by the tide gives visitors a diurnal sense of isolation. It is claimed to be a ‘thin’ place (e.g. Sadgrove 2013, 33) where the boundaries between material and spiritual worlds are blurred (Berés 2012).

The monastery on Lindisfarne was founded by Aidan in 635 (EH III 4). At this point the island was likely wooded and the monastic site would have sat on a headland, a feature largely lost when the lagoon on its eastern side was drained in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Petts 2017a, 3-5). It is uncertain what remained of Christian practice in Northumbria following Edwin’s death and Paulinus’ subsequent flight to Kent in 633, although the continued presence and activity of James the Deacon (d. circa 672) suggests some degree of resilience in the Augustinian mission south of the River Tees (EH II 20). Thus, it cannot be certain whether Aidan was brought from Iona to convert or to reclaim Northumbria, or indeed whether there

was a deliberate policy on Oswald's part to subvert Paulinus' Roman teaching in preference to that from Ireland. Regardless, to some extent Aidan's Christianity was alien to Northumbrians in as much as he and his first companions did not speak English and at first required the King himself to translate for them (EH III 3). Bede portrays an influx of Irish monks spreading across Northumbria as they were given land on which to build monasteries with people 'flocking with joy to hear the word' (EH III 3). He describes Aidan's roles as a missionary and a pioneering bishop with considerable regard but saves his highest praise for Aidan's example to the clergy of the need to reject those aspects of Anglian custom which Bede viewed as bringing moral decline in his own time (EH III 5; Mayr-Harting 1991, 44). Aidan's mentoring of Hild as an abbess on the banks of the Wear and then at Hartlepool (EH IV 23) points to a further dimension of his activity, not least directly within the royal court where he continued to be influential after Oswald's death. Aidan died in 651 at Bamburgh where a tradition survives that a timber in the present parish church is that against which he leant in his last moments (McKibbin 2021, 202, also EH III 17). He was buried in the monastic cemetery on Lindisfarne to be later translated *ad sanctos* to the south of the altar of the newly constructed Church of St Peter (EH III 17).

Following the Synod of Whitby in 664, Irish elements of the Lindisfarne community returned to Iona (EH III 26) and it is around this time that Cuthbert became Prior of Lindisfarne. Four 8<sup>th</sup> century sources provide the earliest hagiographic detail of Cuthbert's life: an anonymous *vita* of around 700, Bede's verse *vita* of 716, his prose *vita* of around 721 and those details that are contained in the *Ecclesiastical History* c. 730 (Stancliffe 1989, 21-30). Why Bede should write two *vita* is a source of scholarly debate as is the relationship between the two documents (Farmer 1998, 16), although it may show Bede trying to accentuate elements of the Cuthbertine cult to support his own concerns (Thacker 2002, 119). Regardless, a composite picture of Cuthbert emerges of him being born around 635 to a privileged family, his entering Melrose Abbey where he received formation in the Irish tradition and his being amongst those from Melrose who founded the house at Ripon only to return after it adopted Roman traditions. Returning to Melrose, Cuthbert became Prior in 664 and then moved to Lindisfarne as Prior where part of his task was to reconcile the Irish and Roman parties who remained in the community. He was consecrated as Bishop of Lindisfarne in 685 and died at his hermitage on Inner Farne in 687. Although Bede records Cuthbert engaging in the business of the royal court as Aidan had previously (EH IV 26), he is portrayed primarily in

pastoral and spiritual terms, as a holy aesthetic rather than a statesman. Clare Stancliffe (1989, 26-28) detects a shift between the anonymous 700 *vitae* and Bede's later work in a greater openness to Cuthbert's initial habitus in the Irish tradition. This, she suggests points to one of the reasons behind the initial success of Cuthbert's cult in that he could be portrayed as a unifier and reconciler of the two traditions at a time when the Whitby decision was, for some, still raw (1989, 24).

Bede records Cuthbert being buried in the monastic cemetery to be translated ten years later and buried alongside the altar of St Peter's church (EH IV 29 & 30). The relationship between Cuthbert and Aidan's shrines is uncertain but during this act of translation Cuthbert's remains were discovered to be incorrupt and so became a tangible demonstration of his sanctity. Various scholars point to the translation and the subsequent development of the cult as being the progenitor to a remarkable artistic outpouring resulting in artefacts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Cuthbert's 7<sup>th</sup> century inner coffin (e.g. Rollason 1989, 44; Thacker 1989, 105; Brown 2003b., 64-78)

In 793 the monastery was infamously raided and, according to Symeon's account, monastic observance continued until 875. Faced with the threat of a Danish army camped on the banks of the Tyne, the community fled the island carrying with them the relics of Cuthbert, Aidan and Oswald leading to the seven-year peregrination across northern England (HCD XXI). This sequence of events has been challenged, as noted above, by McGuigan (2019) amongst others.

## **2. Archaeology**

The heritage landscape of Lindisfarne is visually dominated by the prominent 16<sup>th</sup> century fort and the remains of the 11<sup>th</sup> century priory. Immediately adjacent to the priory church stands the medieval parish church of St Mary with an open churchyard that continues to serve the island community. Church, churchyard and priory, together with the extant post-medieval

village, sit over the site of the early medieval monastery (O'Sullivan 1989; Wilkins and Petts 2016; Petts 2017a) and thus there has been no opportunity for large-scale open excavation such as that conducted at Hartlepool (Cramp and Daniels 1987) or Whithorn (Hill 1997; Wooding 2009).

Initial clearance of the site took place in 1888 (O'Sullivan 1989, 15) and in 1915 Charles Peers (1924) oversaw various excavations on the site. Peers recorded assemblages of worked stone, although in secondary contexts, including that incorporated into the fabric of the 11<sup>th</sup> century buildings (1924, 269). Brian Hope-Taylor led further excavations in the early 1960s and, although an excavation report was not published, substantial medieval occupation was indicated albeit with only modest evidence of earlier phases (Petts 2017a, 3). From 1977 into the mid-1980s various excavations were undertaken by the University of Leicester (O'Sullivan 1989) and from 2016 by Durham University in association with the community focussed group Dig Ventures (Wilkins and Petts 2016).

Bede notes that as Bishop Colman (d. 674) left the island to return to Iona with those monks who could not accept the outcome of the 664 Synod 'there were very few buildings there except for the church, in fact only those without which the life of a community was impossible' (EH III 26). Here Bede lauds the austerity of the early monastery, perhaps to contrast the relative comfort of his own later surroundings at Jarrow in the context of his repeated warnings against the avarice he perceives in the church of his own day. This may be indicative of material differences between the Irish and Roman traditions.

During his excavation in the priory church, Peers (1924, 257) noted the foundations of a rectangular building which he considered to predate the later building. As to whether this related to the early medieval monastery or a 'temporary church' (257-8) from the 11<sup>th</sup> century he was uncertain. Peers considered the later parish church of St Mary to contain elements of earlier stonework and suggested that it might represent the site of the 'Green Church' (HCD XXII; Peers 1924, 258). Subsequent scholars have been more cautious in this identification (Petts 2017a, 7-8) although the linear arrangement of monastic churches on a west east-axis is well attested (Blair 2005, 199; Foot 2006, 111-113; Gittos 2013, 55-78) and

would tend to support an early date for any buildings over which the priory church and St Mary's may now sit. A further chapel was excavated on Heugh, a rocky outcrop adjacent to the monastic site, by Hope-Taylor (Petts 2017a) and there are textual suggestions for a fifth church alongside the Green Church (Petts 2017a, 8) and possibly a sixth, if one dedicated to St Columba is allowed (O'Sullivan 1989, 140).

Dierdre O'Sullivan (1989, 138) suggests that tracing the street pattern of the modern village allows for some reconstruction of the line of the monastic vallum. Her conclusions are, however, less secure following a more recent geophysical survey which revised the understanding of trackways and entrances into the village (Petts 2017a, 9; 2017b, 49). This has led to the suggestion of a dynamic site where features offered differing delineations during various phases of development (Petts 2017a, 13). Attempts to discern any early medieval zoning of the site (a feature often associated with monasteries from the Irish tradition (Campbell and Maldonado 2020, 60-61)) remain frustrated, largely because of the *ad hoc* pattern of excavation in the village. Whilst features continue to be discerned (Petts 2017a, 10), any attempts to reconstruct a plan of the monastery remain speculative.

Perhaps the most remarkable artefacts recovered from Lindisfarne from the Northumbrian period are those in the assemblage of worked stone. In this corpus, the volume of early medieval name stones that have been recovered on the island is a particularly distinctive feature. Whilst there are parallels from elsewhere in Northumbria, and in particular from the monastic site at Hartlepool (Cramp and Daniels 1987), the largest single concentration has been recovered from in and around the priory site (Maddern 2013, 2). The stones may be typified as being inscribed with a cross and a name, although with no indication of status or function, and presumably bore some memorial or liturgical role. Overall, they remain somewhat enigmatic though are likely material representations of the early Northumbrian preoccupation with Christian beliefs around death, resurrection and the Last Things (Maddern 2013, 247-255).



### **c. Interpretation**

The priory site is under Guardianship and is managed by English Heritage whose visitor centre and exhibition space lies adjacent to the primary route into the churchyard, through which the priory is accessed. The visitor centre was reopened in 2023 (Brown 2023) after a major re-working of the exhibition and the introduction of a new interpretative scheme. The display includes artefacts that have been recovered from the most recent excavations on the island as part of a joint project between Dig Ventures and Durham University (Wilkins and Petts 2016). Prominent within the exhibition is an assemblage of name stones and two reconstructed standing crosses. Of note, outside of the visitor centre in the priory church itself, was the decision by English Heritage to include a stone memorial to Cuthbert on the site of the medieval shrine (Brown 2023).

Holy Island village also hosts a visitor centre which contains a facsimile of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Unfortunately, this centre was not open during the period of research and so has not been included in this study.

### **e. The National Museum of Scotland**

The relationship between Northumbria and the British kingdoms of modern southern Scotland is relatively understudied (Cessford 1999, 160; Forsyth and Maldonado 2013, 16). Differing academic priorities, together with a variance of frameworks in areas such as the reporting of casual finds, have discouraged researchers from crossing the border (Blackwell 2018, 21-22).

The traditional narrative surrounding Northumbria in modern Scotland is one of an encroaching Anglian hegemony up to defeat at the battle of Dún Nechtain in 685 (EH IV 26),

followed by a resurgent Pictland and Strathclyde. This account has come under recent scrutiny leading to suggestions that Bede and others portray a pseudo-historical Northumbrian normativity (Fraser 2002 & 2009). Employing methodologies inspired by post-colonial studies, Alice Blackwell (2018) analysed Anglian small finds and suggested that their distribution promotes a hybrid view of the Northumbrian presence in Scotland where different patterns of materiality resist a homogenous interpretation. In this, the well-attested frequency and ease of movement of churchwomen and men across the borders between Gaels, Picts, Britons and Angles points to the primacy of ecclesiastical familiar bonds, which sit over and above that of ethnic nationalisms (Fraser 2009, 197).

Although modern demands for cogency in questions of ethnicity and identity in early medieval Scotland are evidentially thwarted (Fraser 2009, 197), such expectations were evident in the creation of the National Museum of Scotland from its inception (Cramond 2011, 37-39). The Museum traces its lineage back to that of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, founded in Edinburgh in 1781 (Cramond 2011, 10). It is the primary repository for artefacts recovered from across Scotland and, together with the other constituent museums of the National Museums Scotland group, an Independent Research Organisation recognised by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (National Museums Scotland 2023). Most of the displayed early medieval material is in a permanent exhibition on the lower level of the museum, a purpose-built design that opened in 1998 to much architectural acclaim (Benson 2000, 17-28; Cramond 2011, 33). The extant interpretative scheme dates from this time and, being expected to have a thirty-year lifespan (Clarke 2000, 221), was not revised during the most recent re-development in 2016 (Gere, 2016). This 1998 scheme has been the cause of some controversy from the outset where criticism was levelled at its attempt to combine thematic and chronological approaches whilst aiming to appear neutral regarding questions around the future of Scotland as an independent nation outside of the United Kingdom (Ascherson 2000; Clarke 2000). Regardless of this intent, however, the museum was expected to address perceived imbalances in the presentation of Scotland's past and to contribute to its future identity (Jones 2000, 3-13). The current interpretative scheme and the dominance of the physicality of the building were themes that frequently emerged during interview and will be discussed in detail below.

Amongst the Northumbrian artefacts on display are fragments of worked stone from monastic sites such as Hoddum and Coldingham and a variety of small finds. Other potential Northumbrian connections are largely unexplored, perhaps most strikingly in the case of the reconstruction of fragments of a late 8<sup>th</sup> century processional cross<sup>16</sup> recovered from Dumfriesshire. The text panel devoted to Whithorn makes no mention of the well documented, and excavated, 8<sup>th</sup> century Northumbrian monastery. There is no guidebook to the collection although the Museum has published, and distributes from its retail outlets, an illustrated book on early medieval Scottish themes largely guided by artefacts that are on display (Clarke, Blackwell and Goldberg 2017).

## **f. Whitby Abbey**

### **1. Background**

With its dramatic ruined 12<sup>th</sup> century abbey church siting on a prominent headland overlooking the North Sea, Whitby would appear to be the quintessential site for a romanticised early medieval monastery. As Tony Wilmott (2017, 82) demonstrates, however, the Whitby headland has been subject to considerable erosion and the 7<sup>th</sup> century site may be better understood as siting around half a kilometre inland, protected from the prevailing onshore wind by a cliff edge which rose upwards towards the sea. Blair (2005, 65-71) suggests that proximity to Roman sites may be influential for the positioning of earlier 7<sup>th</sup> century minsters and, whilst dismissive of the suggestion that the early medieval foundation sits on the site of a Roman beacon (Bell, 1998), Wilmott (2017, 82) hypothesises the presence of a much larger Roman material presence which has subsequently been lost to erosion. The foundation of the early medieval monastery on the site is likely a reflection of multiple factors including transport, the proximity to estates and economic links and, together with the lingering suspicion of romanitas, as such, is unlikely to support modern notions of a monastic search for seclusion (Wilmott 2017, 91).

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<sup>16</sup> Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland X.FC 179

Bede (EH III 24 and IV 23) records the foundation, or possibly re-foundation, of *Straenæshealh* (or *Streuneshalgh*) by the noblewoman Hild (d. 680). He describes her as being of royal lineage, having been baptised by Paulinus during his Northumbrian mission to Edwin's court, and entering religious life at the age of thirty-three. She founded a small religious house near the mouth of the River Wear from where she became Abbess of Hartlepool under Aidan's guidance. A further move to *Straenæshealh* took place although Bede appears uncertain whether this was to found the monastery or put its affairs in order (EH IV 23). This mixed house, Bede notes, produced five bishops including Wilfred who would advocate the Roman dating of Easter at the 664 Synod. As a significant monastic site, the monastery included the Church of the Apostle Peter which was to become a mausoleum for King Oswiu (d.670), Edwin and other members of the royal dynasty. Oswiu's daughter Ælfflaed would go on to be one of Hild's successors as abbess placing the monastery very much within the orbit of the Northumbrian royal court.

The translation of *Straenæshealh* is problematic (Rahtz 1995, 1) and has led to the suggestion of modern Strensall near York as an alternative location (Barnwell, Butler and Dunn, 2003). No material evidence has, however, emerged at Strensall to support this theory and Bede's placing of the monastery thirteen miles from that at *Hacones* (EH IV 23) corresponds to the distance between Whitby and modern Hackness where Anglian worked stone, not least that mentioning an abbess, has been recovered (Lang 1991; Wilmott 2017, 82). Regardless, excavation at Whitby (Peers and Radford 1943; Hunter et al 1998; Wilmott 2017) places a substantial Anglian settlement on the site from the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century with features such as a vallum, cemeteries and a chapel which together with evidence of literacy are indicators of monastic activity (Petts 2017, 49; Cramp 2017, 28; Blair 2005, 211). In this way scholarly consensus concurs with Wilmott in his description of the identification of Whitby with *Straenæshealh* as 'secure' (2017, 82).

Wilmott (2017, 82) suggests that the Anglian monastery was destroyed by Danes in 867 and while this accords with Danish incursion into Northumbria the date is left open by other authors (e.g. Hunter et al 1998, 11; Brindle 2020, 3) The extent of material destruction or survival may be framed by King Edmund's direction for the removal of the relics of Hild in

944 and their translation to Glastonbury (Cramp 1974a, 223) with the attendant suggestion that sufficient remained for them to be discoverable. The continuation of a monastic, or indeed secular, community is not, however, supported by excavation where an absence of pottery from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries seems to indicate a hiatus in occupation of the headland (Wilmot 2017, 86).

## **2. Archaeology**

The first excavations of the modern period took place under the direction of Peers in 1924-25 (Peers and Radford, 1943). An area to the north of the medieval abbey church was excavated and this is likely to be at the centre of the Anglian monastic complex (Wilmot 2017, 89). Perhaps with some understatement, Cramp notes the destruction of many of Peers' site records through the 'hazards of war' (1976, 224) and re-evaluations by both her and Rahtz (1976) concluded that the 1943 excavation report contained such a degree of ambiguity to imperil the accuracy of any interpretation. Peers and Radford identified a 'smithy' and several individual cells consisting of a room with a hearth, interpreted as a 'living room', a smaller 'bedroom' and an adjacent latrine (1943, 31). Rahtz (1974; 1995) subsequently demonstrated that rather than there being a spread of small cell-like structures there was in fact a multi-period site with elements from large and complex ranges of buildings 'which has more in common with that of a developed medieval monastic claustral plan' (1976, 462). Rahtz also notes Peers and Radford's mapping of only stone structures with the inference that any evidence of wooden or other construction had passed unobserved or unrecorded during excavation (1976, 461). In the absence of detailed recording, Rahtz describes Peers' excavation as 'a great opportunity [that] was lost' (1995, 9).

In her analysis of Peers' finds register, Cramp notes a 'spread of female debris' (1976, 456) which included bone comb, pins, buckles, strap ends, and multiple pairs of tweezers. Across the site, styli and book clasps suggested a high level of literacy. Cramp equates the finds

assemblage at Whitby as being comparable with other monastic sites, albeit with a greater suggestion of female occupation than, say, at Jarrow or Monkwearmouth (1993, 65).

The site has been subject to multiple subsequent investigations (Rahtz 1995, 2-9; Hunter et al. 1998, 11; Wilmott 2017, 82-91). The year 2000 brought a catastrophic cliff collapse (Wilmott 2017, 85) together with a keener appreciation of just how much of the site may have been lost by erosion since the monastery's 7<sup>th</sup> century foundation. Salvage excavations (Wilmott 2017, 86) revealed a densely occupied Anglian settlement to the northwest of the extant standing remains. An Anglian palimpsest consisted of a complex sequence of buildings, ditches, wells, and pits overlying the post-holes of an earlier hall-like building where a hearth gave an archaeomagnetic date of 605-805. Finds were sparse but included a fragment of a funerary cross and an assemblage of pottery sufficient to support the suggestion of abandonment during Danish rule. Elsewhere on the eastern edge of the headland, excavation revealed a large Anglian hall, together with evidence of glass working. Across the headland, although there has been considerable post-medieval disturbance, the Anglian level has been discovered relatively intact below its debris layer, but the stratification is complex and contemporary interpretations are on the side of caution (Wilmott 2017, 88).

Peer's excavation provided the core of the so called 'Whitby Plain Cross' group of monolithic stone crosses, dated between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries which James Lang (2002) views as being both possibly the earliest stone crosses of Anglo-Saxon England and direct evidence of continental influence originating in Gaul. These crosses may have a particular role in suggesting that the Deiran court looked towards Gaul for its cultural loci in contrast to a Bernician gaze towards Iona (Cramp 1993, 61). Excavation on the headland has consistently revealed quantities of distinctive Whitby Ware dated between 650 – 850 (Hurst 1976, 305). This type has been observed at other Northumbrian monastic sites (Laing 1974; Hurst 1976, 305) suggesting either direct transmission between monasteries or as part of an established pattern of transference of artisan skills and techniques that may also potentially be seen in metal working, bookbinding etc. As Hurst notes, however, there is insufficient evidence to confirm one way or another whether Whitby-type was an intrinsically monastic pattern and there is need for further research (1976, 307).

With the loss of a considerable area of the site to erosion, there is scope for the early monastery to have been much larger than the extant medieval remains suggest. Excavation has not revealed the phasing of construction such as was discovered at Hartlepool (Cramp and Daniels 1987) although its expectation would not be unreasonable (Cramp 1993, 65). While there is no discernible move from wooden to stone building techniques, indeed both appear to co-exist, the complexities of the site coupled with the ambiguities arising from the Peers excavation leave room for some uncertainty. There is no clear evidence for an early monastery made up of the small cell-like structures with specific functions such as Bede describes at Coldingham (EH IV 25), but equally nothing points to communal dormitories such as that at Jarrow (Cramp 2017, 37-38). Much of the detail of the site remains highly enigmatic.

### **3. Interpretation**

Under the care of English Heritage, the Abbey is interpreted both by external information boards placed around the extant building and an exhibition housed in a visitor centre. The centre, opened in 2002 (Ward 2002), lies within the shell of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Abbey House, itself a successor to post-Dissolution conversion of a medieval monastic building. The exhibition lies within a single gallery which was last revised in 2019 (Interview B52, 2023) and follows a generally chronological approach to the occupation and use of the site, albeit with thematic sections. Entrance to the exhibition is designed to be primarily from the reception desk in the visitor centre, although this is somewhat confused by a second entrance to the site (adjacent to the main car park) allowing visitors to enter the gallery through what may have been conceived as the exit. The external interpretative boards observed during site visits (2022) have a different design to those in the exhibition, suggestive of them being from an earlier interpretative scheme. They are supported by an audio guide using equipment available on entry to the site. An English Heritage guidebook is available (Brindle, 2020).

Within the town of Whitby itself, the Whitby Museum contains a notable collection of early medieval artefacts from the abbey site, including significant epigraphy. A collection was begun in 1823 by the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society, moving to its present purpose-built site in Pannett Park in 1931 (Whitby Museum, 2023). The overarching approach to exhibition in the museum is that of a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ (e.g. Tzortzi 2015, 43-45) and reminiscent of 19th century museum practice, with wooden framed glass cases containing a multiplicity of items. The collection includes many of the most significant finds from the 1924 Peers excavation donated to the museum or sold by the landowners of the site in lieu of death duties. The current display interpreting the early medieval abbey was revised in 2019/20 following an approach from English Heritage both to request the loan of artefacts for the revised Abbey site exhibition and to offer to lead on the re-cataloguing of the museum’s early medieval collection (Interview B17; pers com B17 2022).

## **f. Whithorn**

### **1. Background**

The modern settlement of Whithorn sits in the Machair peninsular on a small hill rising 6.0m above the surrounding terrain (Hill 1997, 7). Unlike other sites it is situated some distance from the sea, the nearest harbour being in the inlet of the sheltered Isle of Whithorn five kilometres to the south. There is no major water course and with no apparent economic reason for the sitting of the settlement other than it being on a slight rise. Peter Hill concludes that the singular characteristic of the site is its obscurity (1997, 7).

Bede names Whithorn as the site of the ‘White House’, a stone church dedicated to St Martin built by Bishop Ninian (traditionally d. 432) before the arrival of Columba (d. 597) at Iona in 565 (EH III 4). Although a British cleric, Ninian escapes Bede’s normal opprobrium for the British Church (Stancliffe 2007) because he had received orthodox instruction in Rome. Bede credits Ninian with the conversion of the ‘southern Picts’, though appears to be reluctant to offer a date for Ninian’s ministry other than to note it being ‘long ago’ (EH III 4). Bede



describes 8<sup>th</sup> century Whithorn as being a recent addition to the sum of Northumbrian episcopal sees (EH V 23), bringing the number up to a total of four, and would appear to have had direct contact with its first Anglian bishop, Pehthelm (d. circa 735) (EH V 14). The identification of Whithorn as the site of Ninian's church has been called into question through the observation that the quantity of early glass which has been excavated at Whithorn is greater than that at any other site in Britain (Campbell 2007, 117; Forsyth and Maldonado 2013). This suggests that Whithorn was initially a high-status secular site rather than an aesthetic monastic settlement, albeit one where various finds indicate an early Christian presence. In rejecting modern Whithorn as the site of the White House, Kathryn Forsyth and Adrián Maldonado suggest the major ecclesiastical settlement at Kirkmadrine on the Rhinns of Galloway peninsular to be a more convincing monastic location. Kirkmadrine is the site of the discovery of a quantity of Christian inscribed stones that can be firmly dated to c. 550-600 (Forsyth 2005; Forsyth and Maldonado 2013, 36). Regardless, the identification of an Anglian monastery at Whithorn is secure (Hill 1997, 134; Forsyth and Maldonado 2013, 40).

Bede's account aside, the earliest hagiography of Ninian is the *Miracula Nynie Episcopi*, a poem dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century and possibly written at Whithorn (Brooke 1994, 12; Fraser, 2002, 40-2). The genesis of the origins of the traditions around Ninian have come under recent academic scrutiny, brought about by a wider awareness of Irish evidence, leading some scholars to question whether Ninian has been confused with the Irish bishop Finnian and the British bishop Uinniau (Hill 1998, 15; Wooding 2009). Ian Wood (2009) sees later continental elements in the accounts of Ninian and conjectures that, while the hagiographies place him in the 5th century, the descriptions of his dealings with the continental church speak more to the 8th century as Whithorn came under Northumbrian influence. This Anglian presence in southern Scotland remains little researched (Forsyth and Maldonado 2013, 16) but the fact that Bede records there being only four bishoprics, and that one of them is at Whithorn, points to its importance and, to some degree, expected permanence in Northumbrian polity. Cramp (1995) suggests that the three earlier bishoprics relate to former Anglian tribal groupings and so the addition of a fourth, with a saintly founder, serves to reinforce the suggestion of the perpetuity of Galloway as established territory in the Northumbrian mind.

## 2. Archaeology

Escaping many of the depredations of antiquarian investigation, the first systematic excavation at Whithorn took place between 1886 and 1887 (Hill 1998, 8-9; Lowe 2009, 2-4) uncovering the 'Latinus Stone',<sup>17</sup> possibly the single most significant artefact from the site (Forsyth 2005 & 2007). Found in a medieval context, albeit one incompletely recorded, epigraphically the stone dates from around 450 and references Latinus and his five-year-old unnamed daughter. Whilst the function and interpretation of the stone continues to be a source of scholarly debate, it is the earliest evidence of Christianity in modern Scotland. (Forsyth 1989, 115-116; Hill 2017). Further quantities of worked stone have been recovered from the site and are indicative of a Whithorn School, with distinctive interlacing and round headed crosses (Cramp 1994, 16; Yeoman 2005, 327).

Significant excavation was conducted by Hill between 1984 and 1991 (Hill 1997). Hill's conclusions were that there were six identifiable periods of occupation on the site, each further delineated by multiple phases, beginning around 500 and leading to a Northumbrian period between 730 and around 845 when much of the site was destroyed by fire. He interprets the Anglian monastic site as consisting of broadly elliptical zones (1997, 67-133) with a central minster and outer residential and industrial zones. The central zone included an earlier assembly area and a cemetery containing a focal grave and a shrine-like structure which was respected by subsequent building phases. At the centre of the shrine was an enigmatic feature which Hill considered to be some form of monolith, although with an unknown function. This monolith was enclosed in the first Northumbrian church, where it dictated the positioning of the altar, and was subsequently respected in various phases of rebuilding. Hill concludes that the shrine commemorated an individual or concept which was attractive and influential over a four-hundred-year period, including the transition to a Northumbrian cultural horizon.

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<sup>17</sup> Whithorn: Whithorn Priory Museum WHP.EC.01

The early inner precinct came to be dominated by two churches, both lying on the same axis, whose construction respected the positioning of the sanctuary monolith. These churches were subsequently cojoined, and in this are reminiscent of other sites such as Jarrow (Cramp 2005). Hill notes that this rebuilding at Whithorn may relate to the creation of the Northumbrian see (EH V 23) in the 730s with a need for larger, or perhaps more imposing, buildings. The churches, together with the other buildings on the site, appeared to have undergone periodic refurbishment every thirty or forty years (1995, 136). A redevelopment of the site in around 760 brought about a period of 70 or 80 years of stability up to around 845.

The evolution of the minster church was paralleled by the construction of a burial chapel. This was destroyed in the 845 fire and excavation revealed a considerable quantity of blue glass fragments suggesting that the building had been extensively glazed (Hill 1997, 167). Of note was a large amount of disarticulated bone in the debris layer created by the fire. Four coffined burials were excavated but the overall quantity of bone was suggestive of a considerably greater number of individuals whose remains were on the chapel floor. Some bone was described by Hill as being ‘green’ (1995, 169) in that it had come from cadavers rather than skeletal remains. Overall, Hill considered the chapel as being ‘unparalleled’ (1995, 167).

### **3. Interpretation**

The visitor to Whithorn may access the site of the Northumbrian monastery which sits adjacent to the later medieval priory. Two venues offer exhibitions of excavated and recovered material and their associated interpretation. The Whithorn Story is managed by the Whithorn Trust with an interpretative scheme dating from 2002 (Yeoman 2005, 326). The Trust was established in 1984 as direct consequence of Hill’s excavations and looks to support local community development through the area’s archaeology and heritage (Whithorn Trust 2023). Historic Environment Scotland maintains the medieval priory remains and manages The Whithorn Priory Museum which displays worked stone from the Whithorn area, including the Latinus stone. Historic Environment Scotland also maintains the

site at Kirkmadrine where the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century worked stone is displayed behind a glass panel utilising the porch of a redundant church.

Of significance to this research is the material that has been published describing the discourses around the management and interpretation of the carved stone under Historic Scotland's care at Whithorn (e.g. Foster and Cross 2005; Hall 2005). This appears to have come about through the gradual formation of research led policies cumulating in a national approach (Foster et al 2016) which will be discussed below.

## CHAPTER FOUR: INTERPRETING BELIEF

### a. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to report the principal discourses that became apparent when considering the interpretation of belief. It is primarily a reflection on *how* interpretation came about rather than an analysis of the interpretation itself which will follow in later chapters. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first considers the habitus of interpretation, that is the social constructs from which interpretation emerges. It begins with a sub-section offering a professional caricature of interview participants and then moves to consider their worldviews and any reported dynamic between these and interpretative practice. A third sub-section then considers how audience need was understood leading to a fourth observing expressions of expertise and a fifth reflecting on professional understandings of participatory practice and the inclusion of communities in interpretation. The final sub-section reports on professional reflections on visitors' religious capital, that is the meanings they bring with them as they enter the interpreted space.

The second section reflects on the praxis of interpretation and how it was reported by participants. The first sub-section reflects on interpretative methods while the second develops themes in interpretative practice. Four shorter sub-sections then consider narrower themes which emerged during the analysis of the gathered data, namely the subjective application of meaning, audience resistance to interpretation, challenges brought about by historical use of site and artefacts and, finally, responses to the appropriation of meaning.

A final short section considers on an underlying theme of the apparent inclination to develop architectural and aesthetic meanings over those emerging from religious or faith-based discourses. This also suggests an ambiguity towards Christian themes within some heritage arenas.

## **b. Scene Setting: The Habitus of Interpretation**

### **1. Professionals**

The methodology for this research included two phases of interviews. The first was conducted with those engaged in the practice of the heritage interpretation of religion, albeit they each had some experience of working in early medieval Christianity. The second phase concerned those with responsibilities for interpretation at one of the six case study sites. First phase interviewees were approached on the recommendation of other interviewees while second phase participants were largely identified through websites. Six invitations to participate in the study were declined or were unacknowledged while twenty-one received a positive response resulting in twenty-four separate interviews.

An imbalance of interviewees and interviews came about for two reasons. Firstly, one curator was accompanied by a second year PhD student with similar research aims to this project, albeit in the post-Reformation period, who was embedded in the institution as part of a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership. Both contributed during interview and so both have been given voice in this research. Secondly, three professionals were actively involved in more than one site or one context. One professional was interviewed three times – once in the first phase of interviews and subsequently twice more in the second in regard to specific sites while two other respondents were interviewed twice, once as part of the first phase of interviews and again regarding a case study site.

While Phase Two interviewees were identified because of their involvement with a particular site, the Phase One participants represented a much wider sphere of interest. These included academics and a wide variety of professionals working in museum settings or holding responsibility for heritage sites. A variety of career stages were represented from those relatively newly employed in the sector to semi-retired academics. Overall, twelve participants were working in England and nine in Scotland. Amongst this latter group there was a developed sense of collaboration amongst early medievalists which appeared less well

defined amongst their English counterparts. A notable unifying factor in northern England, however, was the far-reaching influence of the late Professor Dame Rosemary Cramp (1929-2023) who was mentioned by six interviewees and who was largely credited with the inception of the interpretive schemes at Jarrow Hall and Durham Cathedral as well as influencing those elsewhere.

During interviews, participants would frequently reflect on their own first-hand experience as visitors or equally offer perspectives on sites and museums where they had worked earlier in their careers. The view was taken that these were legitimate inclusions in the overall data set as they represented wider discourses. This resulted in a richer, if a slightly more complicated, analysis than had been originally anticipated. Six first phase interviews referenced case study sites and seven second phase participants referred to case study sites other than those about which they were being interviewed. Overall, this seemed to offer deeper insight and contextualisation. This interrelation also serves as a reminder of the relatively small number of people who are professionally engaged in the public presentation of Northumbria's Golden Age.

Interviewees were asked to provide their current role titles, a conversation which frequently led to self-identification of professional backgrounds particularly as archaeologists or museum professionals (Table 4.1). Understanding of these identities was subsequently supported by web-based searches for publications, academic profiles, LinkedIn pages etc. and, while easy classification was often resisted by complex careers, broad delineations could be observed and these have been used here. Overall, from this limited snowballed sample, archaeologists appeared to be more likely to provide a curatorial voice and when combined with those from academia were more likely to act as 'experts' in that they were deferred to as a source of epistemological meaning and authorised to speak as such (Smith 2006, 51; Carpentier 2014, 119). The background of museologists was varied but included some archaeological first degrees although subsequent postgraduate studies were, however, primarily in museum and gallery studies together with professional training in collections management etc. Those neither identifying as archaeologists or museologists self-classified as historians or art historians. Both of the clergy interviewed held senior posts and identified

as ministers and theologians though had considerable practical experience of managing the installation of interpretative schemes and in working alongside other heritage professionals.

Description	<i>n</i>	Archaeology <i>n</i>	Museology <i>n</i>	Other <i>n</i>
Curator (principal/senior/area/regional)	4	3		1
Curator/ Asst Curator	4	2	1	1
Collections/ Exhibition officer	2		2	
Professor/ Asst Professor/ Researcher	3	2	1	
Heritage Consultant	1	1		
Interpretation Officer	1		1	
Director of Visitor Experience/ Development Manager/ Manager	3	1	1	1
Post Graduate Researcher	1			1
Senior Clergy	2			2
	21	9	6	6

Table 4.1 Role Descriptions and Professional Disciplines of Interviewees

The interview sample included five archaeological doctorates, one in history, and one museological. Two interviewees were working towards PhDs (one museology, the other in art history). Eighteen of the sample of twenty-one had some form of relevant postgraduate qualification (archaeology, history, museum studies etc.) and there was a wide spread of relevant publications which could be attributed to participants.



## 2. The Professional Worldview

As part of the methodological design of this study it was anticipated that individual participants might reflect on their own religious and spiritual beliefs during interviews. This was expected to emerge in conversations around the suggestion of the interpretive subalterning of the lived experience of religious belief (Gilchrist 2020, 31-32) or possibly as a factor in the mechanism whereby interpretative schemes were conceptualised. Of the twenty-one heritage professionals interviewed, all bar three volunteered some insight into their own world view. Overall, the opinion was that religious belief was advantageous in the presentation of faith. However, this was an extremely nuanced response in that the principal benefit was foremost portrayed as being a factual familiarity. There was no suggestion that a more experiential, or emotive, insight could be advantageous:

So yeah, there's a lot of mysterious language around Catholic material culture. And I think my background being raised Catholic certainly helped me be able to understand a lot of that from the beginning, without having to research it. (A33 27:07)

I've known it from colleagues say when we've done trips to, to Rome, looking at the Early Mediaeval church evidence in Rome, and some people who say hadn't been brought up in the Catholic faith, which I was, they do say to you, well, this is I just don't feel I have the background knowledge to really take in everything that we've been told.  
(A09 12:57)

I mean, this is anecdotal. But one thing I would say, purely anecdotal, but one thing that's always struck me about working in the Early Mediaeval period is, and looking at scholars of that period is, a large number who come from a Catholic, brought up in a Catholic environment. And with that, I think and that sort of education that probably comes in that context. I think they that brings a particular perspective, particular interest, particularly perspective, awareness of the Bible, to be honest, to their learning, ...because I think there's, there's one, there's one thing kind of being able to understand that sort of past religious context, which a lot of us would simply feel inadequate, probably to understand. I mean, there are scholars who've made it, that's their area. And I'm saying that some of them I just noticed, anecdotally seem to come from Catholic backgrounds, in my experience seem to be made that their strength, they can talk with enormous confidence about art, historical significance of x, y, and z. (A33 27:20)

Of note is the recurrence of reference to Catholicism in these, and other, responses; the only other denomination identified being a single reference to Episcopalianism. It is tempting to hypothesise that the experience of Catholicity awards the familiarities of additional capitals, however as this element of the background of participants was unexplored it may be unsafe to draw any firm conclusions whilst suggesting an interesting avenue for future research.

None of the interviewees reported personal belief as being a negative factor in the interpretative process, although one did suggest that standing on the outside, albeit in a spiritual rather than religious space, ‘allowed me to then look at all the different denominations with more of a degree of objectivity than I might have, if I was specifically kind of rooted to one or the other.’ (A19 1:07:25). A19 went on to suggest that the breadth of viewpoints was important in producing balanced interpretations and this was a theme that occurred elsewhere:

I think having a faith is absolutely crucial as especially when they're part of a team. Yeah. Because people have all sorts of, and [another curator from the same institution] maybe spoke about this, you know, the people who were part of that original team had all sorts of baggage and religious baggage, some of it was positive, some of it was very negative. And it's important to have a team where you can challenge each other, like, actually, where does that come from? (A19 49:47)

Most interviewees advocated thematic, narrative based interpretation (e.g. Staiff 2014, 96) as a preferred interpretative model when discussing faith. None, however, suggested that their own backgrounds might be a resource in this. When respondents did suggest that their own experiences had been influential it was more through the lens of a generic spirituality rather than religious belief. These experiences appeared to inform interpretative schemes particularly in relation to the lighting and the creation of a sense of place and space. Where the experience of religious belief and practice did inform interpretation, it was taken from people external to the organisation:

I'm also not religious myself. So, talking about the experience of religion, I'm kind of drawing upon lots of different people's experiences in order to understand it myself. (A03 1:09:19)

When asked about who these external sources were, participants usually gave the example of local clergy or groups, such as the Northumbrian Community (Northumbria Community 2024), that claim some form of spiritual inheritance from the period. There appeared to be little consideration of whether these consultees could speak authoritatively to these themes and their utilisation appeared to relate as much to local, political, sensitivities as being a part of a rigorous academic endeavour. This may point to some heritage professionals being unable, at least in part, to critically evaluate contemporary religious nuances. A singular exception to this in the overall sample was the St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow where a sophisticated system of advisory groups was in place and consideration had gone into how representative individuals could be of wider traditions.

One participant, an academic working in the early medieval period, reflected a sense of inadequacy in their own appreciation of the period:

(Interviewer: Do students have sufficient religious literacy so that you can leap straight into the period, or is there a need for explanation?) No, they don't, but I'm not sure I have it either. I feel woefully inadequate. .... when it comes to sort of, you know, the past context, I feel woefully, woefully inadequate. I think there are people out there who are competent. But I think it's.... it's not it's not [any] comfort for me whatsoever. It's not that I haven't read much about it. (A33 43:09)

Most of us just don't have that literacy, it is simply not part of that. And I think it, it makes for a discomfort when we're or it can make, you know, honestly speaking personally, it can make for a discomfort working in that period. (A33 44:51)

This was not necessarily reflected elsewhere. Overall, the interpretation of early medieval faith appeared either to be a category of interpretative endeavour which required no additional qualification or insight or was an area that was left unexplored through a perception that the portrayal of faith was problematic and uninteresting to audiences. The

observation was made, however, that prior to taking part in this research the need to offer any interpretation of religious world views to enable the fullest audience engagement was not something that had been considered:

(Researcher: There's one last question, which is 'is there anything else I should have asked about?')

Um, no, I don't think so. Yeah, I think I've probably said more than I thought I was going to. ... But no, we'll be really interested in in your research. And also, you know, if there are other studies that you've come across, that are about the presentation of any of any of the issues that we're talking about, I would definitely be interested in, in reading them in the future. And yeah, it's a lot to think about. (B15 1:05:45)

### **3. The Professional Conception of Audience**

In the creation of interpretative schemes, an understanding of audiences is considered essential (Black 2005, 218; Ambrose and Paine 2013, 119; Veverka 2015, 13; Slack 2021, 87-88). Through this understanding, interpretation can be appropriately created to meet the needs of its most likely users through the targeted use of differentiating interpretative devices (Slack 2021, 107-112). These insights may be gained both through qualitative and quantitative research within pre-existing and intended audiences (Black 2005, 12 -32) where a wide variety of methods may be applied (Davidson 2015, 507– 514; Vereka 2015, 110-112). Although there is no single model for audience evaluation and classification, several typologies are widely used. Amongst these is *The Audience Spectrum* (The Audience Agency, 2023) which was reported as helping shape interpretative schemes for both English Heritage and Durham Cathedral by offering insight into the needs, expectations and cultural aspirations of different types of visitors. This notion of meeting visitor need and expectation was a consistent theme in the interview cycle and was equated with the accessibility of the message that the interpretation was expected to convey:

The priorities [of interpretation] would be ... obviously you start with responding to visitor need. So, there's some visitor expectation there. (B52 02:20)

When you are in interpretation in a museum, ..... [what] you have to think about is what your visitor needs. So those are the two things I think about what are the stories we want to tell and what does the visitor need? (A03 07:42)

Overall, interviewees reported a desire to widen audiences, something which was frequently linked with an institutional mission to achieve enhanced cultural accessibility and inclusion. This reflects the normalisation of the insights of the ‘new museology’ across the heritage sector (e.g. Halpin 2007, 49-50; Arnold 2015, 318; Skeates 2017, 13-15; Merriman 2020) which, in the context of audiences, may be understood as a democratising process encouraging the widest social participation. In this milieu, some interviewees observed an organisational shift from one centred on conservation and education to one which was focussed on visitors engaging with heritage as a leisure activity, carrying with it the opportunity for revenue generation as a reminder of more pragmatic needs:

[In the past visitors bought a] guidebook that went through the architecture description of these things, a little bit of a bit of history, but mostly .... you weren't encouraged to take anything away from that other than knowledge. Right. So, the idea of going for a nice picnic, although presumably it would have happened, it wasn't a thing that was encouraged or seen as necessary. What we'll see is necessarily you went there, you learned something. Now, a lot of sites now in my limited experience which is only 16 years.... you find that [there is] competition for visitors so basically there's a seesaw .... you get me on one side going ‘you know this is really important, actually this is important historically’ and somebody else is going ‘this really important because we sell lots of ice creams’. And that see-saw is more and more being weighed towards the good day out, and to some extent quite rightly so. So, it includes to go somewhere and have a good day out. (B16 08:41)

Within the body of heritage literature there is a widespread acknowledgement of a move towards a commodification of heritage (Lowenthal 1985; Hewison 1987; Gill-Robinson 2007) which often sits within discourses concerned with authenticity (e.g. Halewood and Hannam 2001) themselves located in the democratisation of mass travel and tourism (Urry 1990). Research continues to suggest that visitors have mixed motivations but that a dominant impetus is simply to have ‘a good day out’ where the engagement with heritage is

secondary (Powell and Kokkranikal 2015). As Pablo Alonso González (2019) has suggested, it may be that economic forces further act to fetishize aspects of heritage to open them up for commercial exploitation, examples of which might include the gradual deconstruction of religious meanings in order to accentuate a more socially acceptable, and commodifiable, aesthetic gaze (2017, 226-227). Museological researchers continue to suggest that the commercialisation of museums and galleries to generate tourist revenue acts to concentrate and homogenise institutions to the detriment of the creation of wider meanings and the engagement of more localised communities (MacLeod et al 2018, 1-2). A more generous approach is, however, taken by Sebastian Latocha (2024) who notes a culturally informed commodification of museums in Amsterdam and locates in this a broadening of the social impact of heritage to the benefit of all concerned: ‘in this city [Amsterdam] the division between the sacred museum and the profane street is fluid’ (2024, 2). The effects of a market dominated discourse may result in innovation being more likely to occur away from national and regional foci (MacLeod et al 2018, 2) and, in some ways, the two case study sites in Whitby acted to reinforce this where the corporate branding of the English Heritage Abbey site stands in some contrast to celebration of the, perhaps more idiosyncratic, ‘cabinet of curiosities’ approach of the town museum.

By and large, however, interviewees did not report any awareness of such issues and offered little theorisation about visitor motivations. Instead, such as they were, observations were framed in notions of a response to audience need and expectation which, regarding religious heritage, could be relatively modest. At Whitby Abbey, the gift shop acted as a barometer (Figure 4.1):

And then the other important thing is, again, something I said at the start is about what our visitors want and expect. And so, one of [a visiting author’s] observations was that we sold virtually nothing of Hild in the shop. Yet you could buy an extraordinary amount of Dracula based material or gothic material. And that’s because we’re reacting to a market force there as well. We could stock every book on Hild and postcards. To be honest, there’s not a lot of portraits of Hild and they’re not something that many of our visitors would want to purchase. (B52 47:36)





Figure 4.1. Dracula at Whitby Abbey Visitor Centre shop, September 2024. Ian Colson.

This concept of response to audience need was frequently returned to by heritage practitioners (as against those with more abstract engagement) and was indicative of the belief that their audiences could be, and largely were, understood. Although audience research was not infrequently mentioned during interviews no access could be gained to this, perhaps protected and commercially sensitive, material and so no judgement of the accuracy of any understanding of visitors could be made. In many ways this was surprising bearing in mind the openness and generosity with which this researcher was generally received. It may be that audiences were unresearched or equally that any data was perceived to have commercial or other sensitivities which prevented its release. Nonetheless, interviewees fluently reported visitor profiles, how they changed and the impact that had on interpretive practice:

Yeah, I think [our] profile from 2015 to pre COVID 2020 was very much people who were probably aged about 50 plus, whites [who] hadn't travelled that far to get here, and probably had some sort of knowledge of Christianity, whereas from 2021, when we reopened after COVID, our visitor profiles now changed very much to a much younger audience, and very much more ethnically diverse, and people are travelling a lot farther to visit. Therefore, they will have a lot less knowledge about Christianity. So, I think in the early days of opening, we kind of knew who our audience were, and I would interpret things a little bit more highbrow for the people that were coming, but now I'm trying to make it so that it's accessible to everyone. (A33 04:53)

It really depends on the day, a lot of the time, but I think in ... in the summer, it's very, very international, [in contrast to other periods of the year] that's something I've been considering with my project quite a lot is explaining these nuances of experience of religion and trying to find these links across religions as well and trying to appeal to these different audiences. But I think it speaks to being a national museum, we've got to kind of cater for two types of audiences, you've got to be aware of both. (A19 21.08)

In her ethnographic study of change in the Science Museum, MacDonald (2001) reported dissonant, primarily curatorial, voices using the same limited visitor research to defend and advocate conflicting interpretative philosophies (2001,132). Her reflection that 'invocations of imaginary visitors were also a potentially effective rhetorical strategy for supporting one's own ideas or dismissing those of others' (2001, 133) revolves around the observed, possibly consuming, enthusiasm professionals had for their particular area of study and the degree of



importance with which they believed it should be offered to, and received by, visitors. This is a useful caution in the *prima facie* acceptance of participants' views of audiences.

Nonetheless, the connection between interpretation and visitor need was consistently reported in this study and while the accuracy of the articulation of that need is open to question it remains an important part of the interpretive discourse.

#### **4. Professional Expertise**

Overall, the concept of audience need carried some degree of ambiguity when reported by participants. It was not always clear whether the 'need' was voiced by visitors through audience research to be answered by professionals or whether some audience deficiency was perceived by professionals who could then offer interpretative rectification. This latter construct falls very much into a traditional positivistic understanding of interpretation (Copeland 2006, 86) where there is a transactional model of information flow. Such a model is exemplified by Tilden (2007) where audiences require 'provocation' and should be understood as blank pages on which the interpreter can provide 'an understanding of greater truths that lie behind any statements of fact' (2007, 59). The interpreter is thus tasked with 'revelation' (2007, 34) with the attendant suggestion of a priestlike disclosure of things that would otherwise be hidden.

In the theoretical approach of the AHD, any subversive democratisation of the production of meaning may be suppressed by authorising bodies to control heritage interpretations and thus to define identities and the ways that the past can be used. Here the voice of expertise becomes the agenda setting source of epistemological frameworks through authorisation (Smith 2006, 51; Carpentier 2014, 119). In the framing of the heritage discourse, experts may apply their professional values and knowledge and thus control the production of meaning through appeals to rationality from a position of access and privilege (Smith 2006, 51; Smith and Waterton 2009, 53).

None of the professionals in this study reported or displayed the antipathy towards audiences which has been observed elsewhere (e.g. MacDonald 2001, 133). What was suggested, however, were tensions between expert and other discourses which were characterised as being emotive or irrational (also Smith and Waterton 2009, 52). This may inform, for instance, a professional response to opposition to the re-construction of a building which was described as ‘ill-educated’ (B12 42:39). Outside of the early medieval, two participants introduced a particular issue which had arisen in the English Heritage estate where modern Christian groups and individuals had attempted to assert meaning on the North Yorkshire Cistercian medieval abbeys. These attempts were characterised as being naïve:

Strangely enough, though, when you look back, when you look back at the thing we did it at Rievaulx [the re-installation on the site of the high altar] but remember that ‘Oh my God, it's got people who are sitting on it’! Of course they will, it's a table, for goodness sake, you know, they don't think it's an altar! It might represent an altar, but why not let them sit on it, you know? But also people deposited flowers in Rievaulx, they put flowers on there. I'm not quite sure who they thought they were commemorating by putting flowers and we did find somebody actually, actually nailed a crucifix to it as well. (B09 1:21:06)

The new ‘altar’ at Rievaulx included elements of the original, consecrated, altar stone and had been re-dedicated with the permission of English Heritage (Diocese of York 2015). The restoration of the altar was reportedly opposed within English Heritage because ‘it was not a holy site...it is an ex-monastery’ (B09 13:08) and came about only following a concerted campaign from outside the organisation. In the denial of it being a ‘holy site’ what might, in terms of the AHD, be characterised as subversive meanings were negated, leaving little room to engage with a broader spread of theological, sociological, and anthropological definitions (e.g. Davies 1994a; Kinder 2012; Miles-Watson 2021). If these had been employed they might have allowed for different conclusions and, in this case at Rievaulx, expert archaeological knowledge appeared to have been successfully contested by the intangible heritage of contemporary religious discourse.

If experts can be identified as those ‘in a position to define and unlock ... cultural value and educate others about its worth’ (Smith and Waterton 2009, 90) there were several points at which interviewees invited such an identification:

Dracula is popular. It gets bums on seats, people will go to a place for Dracula, but I felt it was quite disingenuous to do a Dracula experience at Whitby Abbey. And so even though, we acquired a first edition Dracula, by Stoker, and that was to be a star object I didn't want a Dracula focus. I wanted to seat Dracula in the culture, the history of the site. And that's why everything that's Dracula is weaved, all the way through. (B52 21.35)

The use of the first person in this passage suggests a key role in the definition of the interpretative agenda where professional intent was to broaden the scope of meaning away from a single influential meme. The AHD could be used to theorise this as an expression of expert activity that defines interpretative boundaries and thus becomes an expression of professional power and authority. B52's comments, however, appear located in a desire to present an authentic narrative of the broad history of the site rather than promote one single element of it. While the employment of claims of authenticity is considered a lever symptomatic of the operation of the AHD, B52's stated aim was not to discount other discourses rather to 'weave' them together. This entanglement is an indicator of the complexities of heritage palimpsests and the challenges they present interpreters especially where there are dominant cultural memes. It also acts to offer a pause for reflection on the AHD itself which can be presented as a values system where the power exerted in authorisation illegitimately acts to constrain meaning. In this case the acknowledgement of the popularity of a Dracula narrative could have brought about the subalterning of other perspectives but this was avoided, suggesting that the use of the AHD in developing value judgements is not necessarily straightforward. Instead, the AHD should be understood as a descriptive process, reflective of its roots in the critical realist concern of the differentiation between good and bad theorisation (Smith 2021, 21).

The role of expertise is challenged by the subversion of the AHD through voices promoting intangible, performative and more localised heritages (Smith 2006). Amongst the cautions against an interpretative overreliance on the expert voice is the suggestion of a lack of appreciation that audiences might bring with them a raft of apposite and legitimate constructed (Hein 1998, 34-36) understandings, insights, and meanings (Copeland 2006, 87-88 & 90; Silberman 2013; Staiff 2014, 37-38; Jimson 2015, 534; Deufel 2017). In this way visitors become active, rather than passive, co-interpreters and play a direct role in the creation of meaning, developing communities of interpretation (Fish 1980; Hooper-Greenhill 2007). In terms of interpretative practice, participation may be promoted through the widespread advocacy of narrative (e.g. Jimson 2015, 538; Staiff 2015, 113) as a device which facilitates the construction of individual meanings (Hein 1998, 34-36). This is indicative of the growth of models of participatory heritage (Black 2005; Simon 2010) where the ownership of heritage opens to include wider groups (Imperiale et al 2024). As these interpretative communities stand outside of the traditional academy driven notion of expertise they may be seen as a threat to epistemological identity and power resulting in ambivalent constructions of audience as transient actors who are unable to access full meanings (MacDonald 2001, 133; Smith 2006, 70). Carpentier (2014, 123), however, rejects any legitimacy in such a view by observing that the omniscience of the expert is a modernist fantasy, while equally fantastic is the belief that the professional can be expelled from a participatory institution because expert knowledge has a weighted role in creating meaning. Instead, he suggests, any professional antagonism towards a wider engagement should be replaced with a professional agonism directed towards enabling and facilitating successful participation (2014, 127). Such a perspective was frequently expressed by professionals.

## **5. Professionals and Communities**

The overwhelming majority of participants viewed the involvement of communities outside of their institutions as important and often as a legitimisation of their role. This was particularly true of those who might be placed in the broad category of museologists where the engagement of audiences was a fundamental concern. What varied considerably, however, was the conceptualisation of co-production and how it might be brought about. A

particular difficulty was reported in understanding who and what communities were and how they could be identified and engaged:

I would say that we would definitely want to be community informed, and in some areas, co curate and have greater levels of participation, external participation. The problem then comes in identifying as you say, those groups and I don't have the answer to that moment. When we did some audience research recently ... X [a manager] said 'Okay, three focus groups', and it was all sadly COVID at the time. So, it was the best I could hope for. And I said, 'X could we try to get some more diverse people rather than the same olds?'. And it was very nice that they gave us the money to do this research, because I still learned stuff from it. But what it didn't give me was a nearly as diverse or inclusive enough audience to play with. And, you know, they I saw them all coming into the chat room, and, and they were saying, 'Oh, hi Y [the name of a focus group participant]!' and all that, [and I thought] ah!, you've been here before, there is no one new here..... and they just said it was really hard to identify and then engage younger audiences. So, you know, out of, let's say, 60, people we talked to probably five, six, you know, a handful were anything under the age of 35. So, it's a challenge. And then in terms of faith, you're right, there's an additional level of sensitivity. (A10 29:42)

Definitions of community in heritage policy have been demonstrated to frequently be oversimplistic and hence unrepresentative of the communities they seek to portray (Smith and Waterton 2009, 36 -38). A geographic community rarely meaningfully reflects the sub-communities from which it is made nor the role of the tangible and intangible heritages which confer identity and meaning. Sian Jones' (2004) study of the removal of the lower part of the Pictish Hilton of Cadboll Stone in 2001, and its subsequent replacement by a replica, observed a variety of voices claiming ownership of heritage meanings within the local area. Jones observed hierarchies where various sub-groups of the geographical community awarded individuals authority, and this was often related to the number of generations a person could trace their connection with the village of Hilton. Equally, having a correct 'feel' (2004, 36) for the heritage of the area was sufficient for some relative newcomers to act as spokespersons. This exemplifies the difficulty professionals may have in locating these communities especially where they are expressed in emotive, intangible heritage constructs which may seem irrational. This extends to religious communities too where professionals

may not be fully able to interpret the authority with which individuals and groups may claim to speak.

Of the case study sites, Jarrow Hall offered the clearest example of participatory practice with its attendant community of interpretation. As was noted in Chapter Three, the site's history as a visitor attraction has been turbulent and it may be characterised as an archaeologically driven, didactic museum moving into fuller participatory practice. As this progressed the, primarily local, audience quite literally came to own some of the display:

The first exhibition we put in there was which is unbelievable when you think about it, there's loads and loads of people on the estates outside whose firstborn son is called Bede. Okay. So, nobody had cottoned on. So, we only cottoned on when they went into school, and the teacher started calling somebody Bede, yeah. And his dad was Bede and his granddad was Bede. Okay? And you think, fuck me, how come the museum's not cottoned on to that? So, the first proper exhibition we put in the temporary exhibition space was the collection of Bede, which was your baby shoes, your first like hair, your first football boots, all these Bedes' stuff came in. That was treasures, really, and we called it treasures after that, and it's been nicked now by Tyne and Wear Museums. (B23 22:11)

Although links to the early medieval may appear somewhat tenuous, it was clear that the participatory approach was lodged in the principles of Biscop's monastery and those on which Bede's World itself had been founded. Reflecting on their time as a former director and curator, Mike Benson and Kathy Cremin described their decision-making process:

Typically, we would start by going back to the DNA of the founding moment of the museum, and the purposes of the collection. First, to the founder, archaeologist Rosemary Cramp, who wanted a place people in Jarrow could be proud of, a deeper, longer history of place than that of the twentieth-century stories of struggle and deprivation. Second, to Bede himself, where our mission became to create a social space inspired by Bede and his community, and shaped by the values of learning, discipline, creativity and co-operation. (Benson and Cremin 2019, 24)

B23 described some of the ways in which these values came to be expressed:

We connected to the notion of Bede as a young boy, being allowed to learn rather than just work. And so, we launched our apprenticeship programme, which would see children, young people coming in, through the care system to the justice system, and that that became an award-winning model for apprentices. And we also worked with the housing associations and the NHS to try and get those young people out of some of the circles that [they] were in. So that was a big piece of the work there. (B23 07:16)

And we created the community radio, again, was connected to the thought that Bede wouldn't sit there but connect to the world. And so, the community radio was trying to take a modern day take on how do we connect to the work to the broader world. (B23 07:16)

Such activity was strongly denied, however, to be subverting the academic rigour of the interpretation nor the museum's educational role. These were described as flourishing whilst allowing elements of co-curation:

The next treasures exhibition was a loan from the British Museum. We went down with a collection of staff, including this one guy... who had been in and out of prison, and we were going to London, and he was going to choose what he wanted out of the British Museum Anglo-Saxon collections to bring back up Newcastle. And so I'd said to him 'are you looking forward, go to London'? And he said, 'looking forward', he said, 'I've never even been to Newcastle' [eight miles away]. So, I mean, he went there with his trackie bottoms and his Newcastle top on, again, the British Museum, were like, whoa, what's happening here, but they went and chose these fantastic, you know, early metals, bits of jewellery and stuff. And we brought that back and that was treasures too. So, I would counter that argument. Rosemary [Cramp] did a series of talks, we had academics come in so I would counter that [the suggestion that academic rigour was being lost] to say, what I inherited, and I don't mean this to be rude, but it was somewhere that was unloved. So, the academic rigour and heft was times by a million, because the British Museum was sending their experts up to do talks as well. (B23 22:11)

There was more academicness going on, I've made a new word up, that there ever was previously but linked to in alongside the other work that was going on so everybody could buy [in]to it. You had the Nanas who were who were a volunteer group of 70 grandmothers sitting in on academic lectures. Yeah. And making sense of it because the whole museum started to make sense. (B23 22:11)

As previously noted, ultimately the museum was to financially fail. Both Benson and Cremin (2019) and B23 locate this in an inability to attract financial support because the diversity of activity in the museum did not meet the narrow criteria of grant-awarding bodies. As an area of urban deprivation, the Jarrow community was unable to offer sufficient support and local authority resources were directed elsewhere. With some apparent frustration, Benson and Cremin note: ‘had we worked in a more traditional way we might have been more successful’ (2019, 30-31). However, in this they explicitly reject any suggestion that the key audience, the local community, had been ‘hard to reach’ or apathetic toward its own heritage (2019, 29). Jarrow Hall continues to operate with a participatory emphasis in its current form.

At other case study sites, the Whithorn Trust has unveiled plans to recreate one of the Northumbrian churches on the excavated monastic site (Whithorn Trust 2024) with the intention of training local people in traditional building crafts. Other than this, no other suggestion of embedded participatory practice was observed.

## **6. Professional Perceptions of Religious Capitals**

The importance of the professional perception of audience cultural capitals lies in it being the basis on which interpretative schemes are created. As conversations began with participants about how they understood their visitors, a common initial response was to reflect on the figures implying a decline in religious belief in the 2021 Census for England and Wales (Office for National Statistics 2021). It was frequently suggested that the identification with a religious tradition (and by extension the practice thereof) correlated with a wider appreciation and knowledge:

But, you know, according to the last census, this is the first time that the majority of people said, well, the census is the data is for England at the moment, but the majority of people are no longer claiming to be Christian, are they? So, we can't assume, I



think, in the way that people in the past would have assumed prior knowledge about Christianity. I'm not sure that we can do that anymore. (A10 28:17)

And I think with Christianity, I think it's critical that we explain it to the best of our ability. Not only because there are still Christians, but specifically because there's fewer and fewer, according to figures, people who identify as Christians or know anything about Christianity, I think it makes it even more critical to explain it clearly, more clearly, than we have in the past, not assuming prior knowledge, and challenging to a certain extent, what they might think of it, especially if they haven't been surrounded by their entire lives raised in it. (B37 31:13)

While interviewees felt that increasingly large numbers of their audiences brought with them only the most basic understandings of Christian belief, this did not mean that all audiences were the same. It was suggested that older audiences were more likely to have a deeper familiarity and understanding, although the evidence base for this view appeared largely anecdotal:

So, we can't assume, I think, in the way that people in the past would have assumed prior knowledge about Christianity. I'm not sure that we can do that anymore. And what I would like to do is some research, certainly some visitor analysis, that tries to understand what do we need to tell people when they arrive? (B15 28:17)

I mean, it's a good point, I think, in deeper interpretation, yes. You have to explain baptism and the rest because there is such a fundamental, there's such a breadth of community who do not understand ... I think if you were to interpret this 40 years ago, you would have assumed everybody knew, baptism, different points in your faith life, people don't know because people aren't taught that. (A05 41:35)

Younger audiences, however, were seen as demonstrating limited familiarity with Christian themes, itself, perhaps, a reflection of the move away from confessional Christian religious education in schools during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Thompson 2004). In regard to undergraduates:

It's not something that a lot of students, well you can't assume that they know what it means. Yeah. And you can't assume that they know what the different parts of the

Mass ritual are at all, and that they know things about what happens inside of a Catholic church or a mediaeval church at all. (A46 8:38)

Overall, participants held some degree of apprehension towards the future of religious interpretation, in part because it came apparent that some were conceptualising interpretation purely in terms of written interpretative boards and labels (discussed further below). The limitations of such interpretation as a vehicle to interpret belief and practice was seen as limiting interpretative depth:

Case in point, if you're limiting a label to 80 to 100 words, and you're spending half of those words explaining what a chalice is, you might not be able to wax as lyrical as you would want about the decoration, about the form, about the designer. (A08 18:54).

It was, however, far from the case that every visitor had a limited understanding of Christianity or came unprepared:

*This particular visitor is clearly a priest. He asks the guide 'what was their mission to the local people?'* (Field Notes, Durham Cathedral Treasure, 11th November 2022)

*Long talk with ... from South Carolina on an Episcopal Church 'Celtic' pilgrimage. She says: 'we were given lots to read before we came but I've only just started on it'.* (Field Notes, Whithorn Visitor Centre, 9<sup>th</sup> September 2022)

North American audiences, particularly pilgrimage groups, were especially visible at Whithorn because it is a relatively small venue. Such groups were not approached as part of this research but, on seeing this researcher making field book entries, individual members sometimes initiated a conversation. Most groups appeared to carry detailed notes and some reported having been to preparation sessions before travelling. Their itineraries included sites at Govan, Iona, Lindisfarne and Whithorn and they were given lectures by researchers engaged in the field, including some interviewed as part of this research. As church groups they demonstrated considerable Christian literacy: 'there's some people out there who know

their Bible like people in post-Reformation Scotland used to know their Bible. I mean, they know every iota and quote it back at you' (B12 23:56). Overall, this serves as a reminder that an audience is not a homogenous mass, reinforcing the observation that visitors may include those with considerable knowledge of both the period and Christian belief and practice and thus have quite specific interpretative needs (Staiff 2014, 37-38). It may also be that those culturalized in a modern Christian faith, one honed with nearly 1500 additional years of history, may make assumptions and apply apprehensions which would be unrecognisable to the early medieval people they seek to understand.

### **c. The Practice of Interpretation**

#### **1. Interpretation Observed**

*The Monks' Dormitory is practically empty. Just me and another visitor and a couple of guides prowling around.* (Field Notes, Durham Cathedral Treasure, 3.00pm, Friday 11<sup>th</sup> November 2022)

*The place is full of children, but not the Early Peoples' Gallery. It's a day when the teachers are on strike and the interactive galleries are packed with what look like grandparents taking their unexpected charges for a day out... It has to be said: I'm pretty much on my own down here.* (Field Notes, National Museum of Scotland, 2.15pm Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023)

*Arrived at 1020 and there are more people here now, but it's all about the farm outside. No one is interested in the museum.* (Field Notes, Jarrow Hall, Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> April 2023)

These various field note excerpts are indicative of the challenge which institutions face in attempting to interpret historical and religious themes. By and large, visiting sites was a lonely experience. Of course, this must be tempered by the times and dates that these visits were conducted but, nonetheless, it was difficult not to concur with participants who concluded that both religion and archaeology were of limited public appeal:

A lot of people's eyes glaze over when they think about archaeology, you know, when they think about things long gone. (A46 15:15).

Christianity is part of a different world for a lot of people. (B15 28:17)

While there was some limited use of audio-visual panels, audio guides and interactive children's displays, at the case study sites the weight of tangible interpretation was offered through exhibit labels and information panels. All the sites had some form of presence on the web, although sites varied considerably in form, style and interpretative depth. Overall, they offered less information than guidebooks, when these were available, and were predominately descriptive. A feature of some websites were high resolution images of artefacts which allowed detailed inspection, though none offered pictures of the entirety of displayed collections and the layering of interpretation was limited. No linking to web resources was observed at the case study sites except for Jarrow Hall where QR codes were located next to a display of fragments of early medieval glass and the replica of the *Codex Amiatinus*. These linked to the 'A History of the North East in 100 Objects' website, an initiative of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums. By 2024, however, the replica *Codex* page no longer appeared on the site and the domain name appeared to lapse the following year. It was notable that digital interpretation did not emerge as a theme from the analysis of interview transcripts though any reasons for this are speculative. It may be that judgements had been made about where to target finite financial resources or that the reportedly limited extent of public engagement with digital presentations (Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2022) acts to lessen this area becoming a priority. Overall, the apparent absence of a fuller digital engagement is puzzling, especially considering the opportunities that it offers (Museums Galleries Scotland 2024), and so is an area worthy of further research.

Necessarily limited by word counts and the need to use accessible vocabularies, written text is an imperfect vehicle for trying to communicate complex ideas, not least those concerned with religious themes. A way of resolving this issue was reported by various participants to

be by the provision of layers of interpretation, something which could be achieved through a variety of media. Serrell (1996, 69-73) suggests that effective layering may be defined by purpose (such as the introduction of themes, of specific points of view etc), by intrinsic complexity and by time. This latter, temporal case is not, however, a statement of chronology, rather the fixing of interpretation against the time that audiences are likely to stop and view it. Slack (2021, 114-15) notes that layers of interpretation enable visitor agency in their deciding the degree of engagement with interpretation whilst offering two cautions. Firstly, that audiences can become overwhelmed with multiple levels of interpretation to the detriment of the overall interpretative experience (in this context, Veverka (2015, 409) suggests that some visitors are unlikely to spend more than forty-five minutes within exhibitions before 'heading off to the giftshop or lunchroom') and, secondly, that layered interpretation becomes a scheme whereby, after an initial carefully crafted interpretation, it becomes merely a depository for all other data, reports, references etc. At the case study sites there was, however, little suggestion of this. Interpretive layers consisted largely of thematic panels leading to case labels with little further development. At certain sites, such as Durham, Whitby Abbey and Lindisfarne Priory, interactive panels added meaning but no use was observed, for instance, of web-based interpretation (Staiff 2014, 121-122) other than the two QR codes at Jarrow Hall. At all the case study sites, apart from Kirkmadrine, some interpretation was offered for children. It was notable, however, that this was frequently located on the periphery of the interpretative space suggesting, perhaps, that an adult audience lay at the core of the intended, or perhaps realised, visitor demographic.

During the interview schedule, when asked about difficulties in interpretation, participants would often refer to the challenges posed by the limited wordcounts of panels and labels rather than any other interpretative strategy (also Serrell 1996, 125-127). This response is notable in that seems highly unlikely that these professionals would intentionally disregard both other interpretative approaches and the widely held understanding that every element of the visitor's engagement is part of an interpretive experience, a concept developed in even the most foundational of museological textbooks (e.g. Ambrose and Paine 2012, 122). It may therefore be indicative of written text being understood by those professionals as the preeminent interpretative vehicle. This may be for any number of reasons, not least space and the funding requirements of other approaches, or, alternatively, in the suggested ambiguities

between the processes of design and the messages institutions wish to convey (p.143 below). A further explanation may be found in the theorisation of the AHD where authorising voices are characterised as being reticent to allow interpretative vehicles that enable active agency on the part of heritage audiences (Smith 2006, 69-70). Text, when tightly conceived, is less malleable than other interpretative forms and so in this construct may become the preferred way of creating authorised meaning. Smith (2006, 69) suggests that accusations of inauthenticity may be directed at interpretative performances to discredit those which cannot be directly fashioned by the AHD. This becomes a significant mechanism whereby authorisers can exert control. She particularly notes negative expert responses to live interpretation (the use of reenactors) because it requires the active engagement of audiences, something which challenges the AHD's demand for passivity. Such performances are dismissed or constrained by expert knowledge through appeals to authenticity and by a dismissal of the suggestion that an interpretative encounter can be both entertaining and educational (2006, 69). Only one of the case study sites reported the use of live interpretation where an actor had dressed as a medieval monk in the cloisters of Durham Cathedral:

Where we can we have staff or volunteers on site or in the gallery to help engage people in conversation to answer further questions. And that often leads to a follow up inquiry. Because we've piqued someone's interest, which is great. Then we've also looked at again over the summer, particularly having, erm for want of a better word, actors in the museum. So, for last year, where we had focused on St. Bede, and we had an actor dressed up as a Benedictine monk, and he wandered around the museum and round the cloister and met with visitors and had a chat with him about what he was doing during his day and how excited he was that St Bede had been brought here from Jarrow and that sort of thing. (B03 14:14)

So, then the actor himself, he put together a series of scripts, which are different approaches he would use to engage with visitors, and we read through them first made sure there was nothing controversial. So, we vetoed anything that we thought might be a bit too close to the bone. (B03 18.08)

B03 reported that the interactions between the actor and his audiences had been considered a great success. They elicited questions both to him and to other cathedral guides and he was viewed as increasing paid entries into the museum. It is of note, however, that the monk is

described as an actor rather than as an interpreter and the institutional limitations which were placed on his script. Guides were only observed at Durham and at Whitby Abbey:

*As I sit an English Heritage interpreter is talking with visitors. She's describing the '21 excavation. Words like 'Celtic' come up. She's showing a card – the photographs of the excavation.... Vikings destroyed the abbey. The graves are being identified as Anglo-Saxon graves. 'If you know someone who has God's grace you'd try and be buried next to them' ...Discussion of wattle and daub. A big bunch of flowers was left on one of the graves last July. Hild lived such a simple life that she'd not have any artefacts in the grave with her. Finished, the guide turns to litter picking.*

*I'm a little humbled just listening. The explanation is delivered with care and a certain humility. (Field Notes, Whitby Abbey, Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2022)*

We live in a world where 'contemporary culture...is visual culture' (Schirato and Webb 2010, 19). In this context, the text of both labels and panels begins to lose impact as an interpretative medium, something especially true in the context of the early medieval with its visual richness. Here a distinctive feature is the wealth of worked stone that survives, something which was evident at all the case study sites and was displayed with varying interpretative approaches. In understanding professional practice, the Scottish Executive's *Policy and Guidance* (Scottish Executive 2005) is unique as an open-source document providing specific advice and direction for the interpretation of stone of all periods. The precursor document *Early Medieval Carved Stone in Historic Scotland's Care* (Foster et al 2003) observed that:

Understanding the complexity and layers of meaning ('visual literacy') of these monuments is simply no easy matter. Most were designed to be contemplative monuments (e.g. the verbal and visual riddles of the Ruthwell Cross) and the modern public needs also to contemplate them. The surroundings ought not only be conducive to this, but on-site interpretative provision will ideally provide sufficient visually orientated information for the visitor to be able to make their own discoveries. (Foster et al 2003, 12-13)

Both documents were applied to the 2005 scheme at the Whithorn Priory Museum. The initial proposal was one where visitors entered, in essence, a darkened box where select stones from

the collection would be lit individually to stimulate feelings of ‘awe’ (Yeoman 2005, 328-329). However, after public consultation:

The awe-inspiring darkened space approach has similarly been abandoned, instead retaining the roof-light in the existing space that was purpose built to accommodate these sculptures almost a century ago. The room is light and airy; as clouds pass over the sun the light changes, creating moving shadows on the sculptures. This is a reminder that they once stood outside in the fresh air. (Yeoman 2005, 329)

These stones are arranged so that the visitor can walk amongst the larger examples which stand on the floor rather than any raised display (Figure 4.2). On site visits, other visitors were observed reaching out and touching the stones, even tracing interlacing with their fingers. This stands in sharp contrast to the associated site at Kirkmadrine, where a collection of no less significant sculptured stone stands behind a display glass in an area created out of the porchway into the tower of the disused church (Figure 4.3). Field notes recorded the agency of the stones at the two sites to be quite different:

*A12 is right in that the central atrium does provide a reflective space... People are whispering as they come in here. Another couple arrive and move silently around, church-like. More people arrive, again quiet...The light is so important in here. The wind blows outside and it is easy to see them [the stones] in their [original] context. (Field Notes, Whithorn Museum, Friday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2022)*

*The stones are in the porch of the church, kept out of touch by a glass screen and door. The door doesn't fit well and the interpretative panels are dirty. I'm joined by a couple – bikers perhaps. They look into the window at the stones and almost straight away go and look at the view...the view is astonishing. (Field Notes, Kirkmadrine, Friday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2022)*

It is, of course, the case that all the worked stone in galleries and museums is no longer *in situ* and so a dislocation of place and space has occurred (Foster and Jones 2020, 160). With this there is inevitably a loss of meaning and agency. Whilst the *in situ* placing of carved stone within protective glazed enclosures has been the subject of research, this has often been through the conservator's lens (e.g. Muir 2005, 175-186). How the encasing of stones in glass



whilst remaining in their landscape impacts on their place in a heritage discourse, and subsequent interpretation, is less well understood. There is evidence that in the context of the museum a case becomes an interlocutor between artefact and observer (Berns 2015) suggesting that while a geographical dislocation may have been avoided, other equally disruptive elements come into play.



Figure 4.2. Natural light and shadow. The Whithorn Priory Museum. Ian Colson.



Figure 4.3. Kirkmadrine - worked stone interpreted behind glass. Ian Colson.

## 2. Interpretation Practiced

With the development of the material turn in the field of religious studies (e.g. Morgan 2021), the question of what constitutes a religious artefact has become somewhat enigmatic. While artefacts decorated with religious imagery or ritual usage could easily claim some antecedence, more mundane items might receive less secure identifications. Plate (2015, 3;

2017, 46) argues that a division between the secular and sacred is erroneous and that 'we need to move on beyond simple identification of objects as religious or not, and towards points where the flows of life intersect, overlap, and transform each other' (2017, 46).

Overall, participants tended to agree:

But more, probably more significantly, if you look at museum collections in a detached way, a huge percentage are basically, directly and arguably, religious and a significant proportion of the remainder will be indirectly religious. (A01 01:11)

But I do think it's interesting how a lot of places do tend to historically take things out of a context, to some extent, and give it a new context, which can be about the art can be about the history of more recent history. But sometimes you lose that kind of original sort of meaning or connection. And so for example, our museum in particular as well, really, when I think about it in the element of the religious aspect. Well, our whole collection is a religious collection, because it's from the monastery. It's from the church, the church's collection, and even things that you wouldn't necessarily originally pick up on and go 'that's religious'! (A07 05:51)

The decision as to what might be included in exhibitions or displays was reported by interviewees as being largely dependent on what artefacts were in a collection, or could be loaned from other sources, balanced against a wider judgement over their significance. Other factors included decisions as to whether to try and suggest the scale of monumentality, especially in regard to worked stones, or the volume of artefacts which may have been excavated from each site or related to a theme, the gathering together of which in one place was itself be seen as an interpretative expression (A12 20:04; B16 08:39).

Decision-making around interpretative schemes was reported as a collegial exercise in large organisations such as English Heritage which gave voice to interpretative, curatorial, and historical specialisms during the process. This did not mean, however, that there could not be blind spots, especially where individual academic interest was concerned, and audience reception was seen as a particularly pertinent factor:

Well, look, you know, just because you think something is interesting, doesn't make it interesting. That comes across a lot in our interpretations. Sometimes we always talk about this one. Is that really interesting? - I think you'll find that the man in the street probably didn't care less. (B09 39:01)

Participants frequently expressed the belief that the responsibility for the final form of interpretative schemes lay with those with expert knowledge. Staiff (2014) contests such perceptions, arguing that “today, in heritage interpretation the ‘experts’ are the educators, communicators and designers” (2014, 14; also Emberling and Petit 2019, 9-10). In this way the key concepts in interpretation are dominated by psychology, effective communications, and the nuanced surveying of visitor experience and attitude. Sara Perry (2018) advocates the insertion of specialist interpretation in between field archaeologists and the general public while in museums others argue that interpreters must stand outside the institution in order to act as a go-between it and the audience (Jimson 2015, 545). While only one respondent (A03) described themselves as an interpreter, A33 offered support to a distinctive interpretative role, reinforcing the idea that academics and archaeologists were not necessarily best placed to provide the most accessible interpretations:

I mean, ... it was, like getting a million words down to, you know, you can put 300 words on a panel, if you put more than 300 words on people don't read it. So, you know, it was that it was that kind of distillation. But you can't do that distillation, unless you have the million words to start with from somebody like X, or Y [both nationally renowned academics] you know, who are absolutely excellent. They can't do it themselves. And it's interesting, I actually thought with Whithorn, I would then, you know, X did such a wonderful job in doing research on the stones. I thought, oh, I'll get her to write, write labels, (but she) couldn't begin to do it. And that was an interesting experience and a learning experience as well. So, you know, there's a place for the different skill sets within the process. (A33 35:58)

Other than Whitby Town Museum's ‘cabinet of curiosities’ approach, interpretation at the case study sites was presented thematically (Ham 2013, 20; Slack 2021, 15). Theme may be understood as being ‘the main point or idea a communicator is trying to convey’ (Ham 2013, 20) and should be distinguished from a topic which is the ‘subject matter of the presentation’ (2013, 20). As such, themes were frequently observed to be supported by sub-themes which themselves shared the same characteristics. Participants described how themes could be best illustrated by using narrative: ‘I would look at what my stories are that I want to tell. And I would look at what is the best way of telling them’ (A03 07:25). The notion of ‘narrative’

itself is multifaceted (Staiff 2014, 96) but may be understood as the use of story to deepen and enliven the viewer's relationship with the material, be it sites or artefacts. Narratives may be localised or constructions of national discourses which emerge from the AHD (Smith 2021, 58). Narrative and theme were observed to come together in a variety of places such as a theme concerned with poetry and Caedmon at Whitby Abbey or the name stones at Lindisfarne where the visitor was invited to reflect on those commemorated on the stones and see these as markers of people and communities with stories to tell:

So yes, they clearly make fantastic exhibits. ... For me it was part of the connection with the community that once lived at Lindisfarne. These are our direct link to named people even if we can't actually read their names properly. Now, they're still the named people that had a really, really important connection to Lindisfarne at that point from, say 700 to 800. And it's, I think, several years ago, I think it was something like 15, 14 or 15 name stones known. And the more recent excavations over the last few years, I think we're now up to 23 name stones. I felt really strongly that I wanted to include as many as possible, because of the rarity of them. Because it gives that look that that impression of this continued community. So, it's not just one, one group living there at that one time, either. This is at least four generations of people going through that site. So about so that for me was part of that longevity of this process as well. And it was also, there's no single one that's identical to another. There are some similar in styles, but they're each very unique. And so what you might have noticed, as you read the labels for each is the story gathered, as you went on each one, and you learn a different point about each one. (B16 08:39)

Whilst the use of narrative was widely accepted, participants did not offer any reflection on whether it was a neutral vehicle or that it might be capable of acting to control or channel meaning (Schirato and Webb 2010, 23 - 26). The uncritical adoption of narrative, whilst being an 'overwhelmingly powerful' urge (Staiff 2015, 113), 'sutures heritage places into a particular form of representation; it absorbs the physical entity into chronological time, and it provides action, character, causation closure and a narrator' (2015, 114). This may distort meanings, not least because it requires them to emerge from some form of human agency. This requires some reflection during the preparation for the portrayal of the early medieval where the inanimate could claim its own ontology. This can be seen, for instance, in the belief in the power that emerged from relics which, as part of the divine economy, existed independently from any human interaction.

At all the case study sites, exhibitions were to some degree chronologically arranged. At Whithorn, Jarrow, Whitby, and Lindisfarne, where extant later medieval remains physically dominated sites, interpretative boards placed early medieval monasteries in the historical narrative, although a greater emphasis was often placed on what a visitor might see rather than any hidden archaeology. At Jarrow the wall lines of the excavated buildings (Cramp 2005) were marked in stone, allowing the visitor to trace the plan of the earlier structures amongst the standing remains of the later monastery (Figure 5.1). With some exceptions (for instance, in the entrance display at Lindisfarne) there was little chronological differentiation within the presentation of Northumbrian themes and a tendency to present the period as essentially homogenous. The 664 Synod of Whitby and the 794 raid on Lindisfarne were, however, frequently referenced although, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, primarily as points of hiatus.

### **3. Interpretation Subjectified**

The idea that some places may be inherently ‘spiritual’ has a wide currency in society. With a focus in the revival of ‘Celtic Christianity’ (Bradley 2018, 3-16) the metaphor of ‘thin places’ (Béres 2012) has been widely embraced in elements of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christianity (e.g. Adam 2006; Wakefield 2008). This has subsequently spilled into other discourses not least as many have come to consider themselves more ‘spiritual’ than religious (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). In bracketing out any role that religious traditions may have claimed as authorisers of spiritual discourses, individuals and groups develop self-referencing definitions of spirituality with their own internal validities. Responding to this, a variety of public-facing disciplines such as education (Watson 2010) and healthcare (de Brito Sena 2021) can chart the development of different spiritual epistemologies leading to a spread of definitions. A perhaps surprising effect of this individualisation may be to act to increase the breadth of sacralisation, as the classification of the sacred widens, rather than supporting the notion of an inexorable advance of a non-spiritual secularism (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 79-80; Casanova 2012, 460). All of this begins to make any attempt to define spirituality, other than in the most generic terms, problematic.

The English Heritage display at Whitby Abbey unambiguously describes the Abbey as a 'spiritual place' (Figure 4.4). The spiritual motivations of heritage audiences are reportedly mixed (Gutic et al 2010; Griffiths 2011) which, when combined with the difficulties of defining spirituality, makes the Whitby Abbey usage notable. The rationale for the claim on the display at Whitby appears to be based on a continuity of use of the site by successive monastic communities, implying some form of spiritual transmission that extends to the present day. Reflecting on the Abbey site, B52 offered a somewhat different perspective and while noting a breadth of spiritual expression appeared to locate this primarily in the aesthetics of the site:

But we also recognise that people had their own level of spirituality, that they may go to a site and find their own peace or their own calling. I mean, that sounds very high, you kind of know what I mean, they, they might just go and enjoy the serenity of a particular part of the site. And for them, that that's almost a spiritual feeling, because they've got that opportunity to go in this really lovely, lovely location. So [we] recognise that spirituality meant different things to different people. (B52)

Similar perspectives emerged at Lindisfarne:

Now, Lindisfarne is slightly different because of the overwhelming spiritual nature of the island itself, the overwhelming spiritual nature that of that environment as well, you know, it was it was difficult to divorce it from that, you know, when you were doing any kind of interpretation. (B09 13:08)

These descriptions invite two observations. First, they seem to place little reliance either on the religious histories of the sites nor on Christian concepts of sacrality, both of which might ground claims for the spiritual. Second, in the absence of a robust definition of spirituality, they appear personal to the professionals who reported them. Both Whitby and Lindisfarne have undergone considerable physical change and there is no evidence that either were initially chosen as monastic sites because of a perceived underlying spiritual nature. Any interpretative suggestion of spirituality must therefore be a later overlay to endorse a particular avenue for the creation of meaning. As there is little agreement on how to define



spirituality it is not unreasonable to suggest that individualised professional perceptions have entered the interpretive lexicon, influenced, perhaps, by generic modern apprehensions of what constitutes the spiritual. An additional dimension is that, as was also noted in the discussion of Rievaulx Abbey, understandings of religiously derived meaning appear subjugated. The choice to use the phrase ‘spiritual history’ at Whitby (Figure 4.4) rather than, say, ‘Christian history’ when this claim is supported by a monastic past, may be indicative of the changing profile of religious belief in social discourse and perceptions of accessibility for a modern audience made up of visitors who hold a broad spectrum of worldviews.



Fig 4.4. Whitby Abbey – a spiritual place, September 2004. Ian Colson.



#### 4. Interpretation Resisted

Museum and heritage organisations can be unaware of their agency in downplaying the active role which audiences have in the creation of meaning (Smith 2021, 8). Interpretations are, of course, areas where expertise is observably deployed, especially in those places where visitors were unlikely to have a co-constructionist voice. Here the audience either accepts that which is offered or leaves, and this may be especially true of institutions such as national museums which might be visited only once or twice in a lifetime. That audiences might not accept what was offered could come as something of a surprise, as could audiences not acting in the prescribed way:

*I interviewed B15 today. As we were talking, B15 reflected on how visitors were always getting the gallery wrong because they were walking the wrong way into it; instead of turning right as they came down from the first floor they should walk straight to the far part of the building and then turn right. I realised that I turned right on all the occasions I had visited as indeed had all the people I'd observed. I'd not noted anyone doing anything different to me. I, and they, had got it 'wrong'. I'd not seen another way of getting there and just went the most obvious route. The mistake, however, was clearly mine! (Field Book)*

A particular source of resistance occurred when traditional narratives were challenged by interpretation. What was perceived as revisionist error could be consistently opposed:

There's an interpretation panel that we put into the, the graveyard at Whithorn. And there's a date. I think it's something like 397 or something like that. It's a traditional date associated with Ninian or one aspect of his work. And we, because at the time there was all this new analysis that people like Thomas Clancy in Glasgow University had done on Ninian [and that] Finian was a completely different person, that we kind of hedged our bets and on the interpretation panel didn't put that date, or just put a vague sort of date, maybe around the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century, ...and somebody who used to come along with a bit of masking tape, and put masking tape over it, and write 397 and then I'd take the masking tape off, and then a couple of months later, when I stayed next, it will be back on again with 397 written on there. (A12 20:04)

Although by an unknown protagonist, this defacing of the authorised interpretation demonstrates that audiences, or here at least one element of it, are not passive consumers of interpretative schemes and can exert significant agency. That the cycle of interpretative claim and counterclaim was repeated demonstrates a process of authorisation and contestation and, for both parties, might be understood as an expression of epistemological authority and power, albeit from very different perspectives. Moreover, that someone was prepared to repeatedly right what was, presumably, perceived as an error points to the agency of interpretations themselves and the power which they exert in the communities in which they sit.

As observed at Rievaulx Abbey, religious identities can conflict with other interpretations laid over them. An incident was observed around the tomb of St Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral where a Catholic interpretation of the significance of the site of the shrine appeared reasserted:

*Into the Feretory. Four 20 somethings are kneeling around the site of the shrine reciting the Rosary followed by the Salve Regina, mostly in Latin. People sit around and listen. Now they say what I take to be Midday Prayer [in Latin]. People move quietly around. A steward appears to light votive candles appearing a bit uncertain as to what is going on. A woman leaves, making the sign of the Cross as she does so. In the background a school party bustle around. What do they make of this? The Salve is well sung, the Gloria too, the Latin is known by heart. The school party appear and walk around the shrine with a guide; they stand in silence for a moment and move on. They [the four people] say a Litany. I am conflicted as to whether I should try and talk with the group praying...where do they come from, what is their intent? The use of Latin is interesting to me. It's almost an act of disobedience, public reclamation perhaps? The woman now kisses the grave slab. The apparent male leader goes out, arm in arm with the woman. There's another man praying in the corner, eyes closed. A woman and her mother (?) come in and sit in silence. (Field Notes, Durham Cathedral, 7 February 2023)*

(As the interviewing of groups and individuals had not been included within the research design nor the associated ethical framework, no follow up was made to those observed.)

Within the cathedral there is little in way of guidance or suggestion as to how visitors should respond to the tomb of Cuthbert, nor that of Bede. The large slab which sits over the grave is

simply inscribed ‘Cuthbertus’ and marked by a lit candle placed upon it. A limited degree of interpretation is offered by handheld information paddle boards which are placed on the seating in the Feretory, itself consisting of benches which run around its edges. On this and other occasions visitors had been observed sitting, often in silence, while others walked through. In many ways this reflects the ambiguity of Anglican attitudes towards saints where on one hand the governing *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* prohibit their invocation, retrospectively endorsing the systematic Reformation dismantling of shrines at Durham and elsewhere, whereas on the other subtle acknowledgement of some form of agency can be observed in the presence of a candle. The Cathedral is welcoming to other denominations, and Catholic Masses have been celebrated in it as part of an opening up to other Christians (e.g. St Cuthberts 2018), however this action by four people appeared more organic. Subsequent conversations with Cathedral clergy demonstrated their awareness of this Catholic group and at least a tacit permission for their gathering around the tomb, but it was not an advertised act of worship and did not appear in the Cathedral calendar. It was, however, a public act of worship which appeared to alter the behaviours of those who came across it. It may be that this could be viewed purely as an act of piety on the behalf of four individuals, but its form and public performance set it against the interpretation of the space in which it occurred. Even if the intent was not in part some form of reclamation or reassertion of beliefs, for that moment the Feretory became something which subverted the dominant discourse and different meanings were applied around which other visitors had to negotiate.

## **5. Interpretation Diffused**

A notable feature of the sites at Whithorn, Lindisfarne, Jarrow and Whitby is the physical dominance of later medieval buildings. This is compounded at these sites by the ephemeral nature of the early monasteries and the scant archaeological remains that persist. Although portions of St Paul’s church in Jarrow are Northumbrian, the building is mostly of later dates and the outline of the footprint of Biscop’s monastery is marked at floor level, although this requires the interrogation of the interpretative boards to understand its significance (Figures

5.1 and 5.2). B52 suggested that visitors moving through the exhibition space at Whitby and towards the Abbey site suffered something of an anti-climax:

You build up expectation, talk about the early Christian monastery to visitors, but there's nothing for them to see. Yeah. So, all the material culture is therefore in the museum and you go out on site and see something totally different. (B52 18:14)

At Lindisfarne B09 felt there was a particular challenge in disassociating the later priory with the earlier monastery in the public mind because the extant buildings were frequently used as a backdrop for a widespread of television documentaries. Few, if any, presenters noted that the extant buildings were not those that would have been present in the 8<sup>th</sup> century:

You have to think how many documentaries you watch where the Vikings, at Lindisfarne in 793, 'the Vikings came and destroyed this place - look at all the mess they made'. You know, Neil Oliver [a television presenter] never wants to tell us 'Oh, by the way, this is 12th century, but the rest of its 1450'. He'll never say that, instead 'look at the mess they made'. (B09 25:29)

A second form of interpretative diffusion was identified by some participants where artefacts which were judged to hold particular significance were held elsewhere. In this way neither the English Heritage Whitby Abbey exhibition nor the Town Museum could tell the full story of the 1928 Peer's excavation because finds were spread between the two. In Whitby a strong, though somewhat asymmetric, relationship between the two organisations was both observed and reported but a sense of incompleteness remained. The specific issue of the Lindisfarne Gospels emerged at both Lindisfarne and Durham (B16, B07, B021) where its placement in the British Library was reported almost as a slight to regional identity, a claim which not infrequently emerges in the local press (e.g. Sagar 2025). B16 reported that any interpretation at Lindisfarne would be diminished without referencing the Gospels and, indeed, the Cuthbert relics held in Durham. Images of these had been used but, as Veverkah (2015, 408-409) notes, the agency of pictures representing artefacts may bring about a passivity in visitor engagement and generate low levels of intrinsic interest. The regret of the

spread of those artefacts connected to Cuthbert may be suggestive of the power of iconic objects in interpretative narratives.

## 6. Interpretation Appropriated

Several researchers have observed a propensity for far-right political groups to appropriate an early medieval identity (e.g. Wilton 2020; Ramos 2023). In particular, the use of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ has been controversial in several national dialogues and the predisposition of some parts of the British academy to dismiss this as purely a North American concern has been criticised (Rambaran-Olm and Wade 2023). During this research, the word ‘Anglo-Saxon’ was, however, used widely in interviews and observed in interpretative schemes even though respondents reported unease around the issue:

And interestingly, as a cathedral, you probably noticed from how I speak now, we tend to talk about Northumbrian identity and not Anglo Saxon, because the use of the term Anglo-Saxon to an American audience and hearing then carries you into a different direction of play. And so, we choose to be deliberately accurate in terms of what nation we are talking about, in order to avoid potential leakages elsewhere. (B07 35:26)

So personally, we've had some discussions. So Anglo-Saxon is in the curriculum, the school curriculum and things like that...but we personally prefer to use ‘early mediaeval’, or have been using more ‘the early mediaeval period’, because there's obviously a lot of discussions happening at the moment about terminology. And also as well, because, unfortunately, you get a lot of groups, particularly if you're thinking about wider audience, I know it's an audience thing. But if you think about wider audiences, and the fact we've got an online presence, for example, you know, you've got groups in America, for example, that are using the term Anglo Saxon in completely different ways. And, and you've got to really consider those audiences. (A07 52:27)

Well, my preference would be to use early mediaeval. And I've tried to put that in several times. But the problem is I think people wouldn't understand Angle, and people wouldn't understand early mediaeval. So, because what they teach in school is Anglo-Saxon. So, I wanted to make it approachable to both school parties and old people who were taught to call it Anglo-Saxon, but I have tried to, sometimes I think put it in brackets ‘early mediaeval’. (B17 1:15:53)

It may seem, on face value, that such concerns are somewhat divorced from the practice of interpretation. The reality was, however, that appropriation of the period by far-right groups had been directly experienced:

So, we had it, it was a few, good few weeks ago, I think now. And we were alerted by just something on social media where there was a group of that sort, that actually they visited the monastery. And we were disgusted, we were absolutely disgusted. Actually, when we saw this, we had a bit of a conversation as a team, because they'd visited the monastery with banners. And then also, they'd spent the day at Jarrow Hall just as normal visitors, as you were just visiting and things. And they tagged us in a post and obviously, with a picture of the banner, at St Paul's, that they'd obviously gotten out of various things. And just some pictures of them going to see the animals, not any banners, specifically or anything here on site, because I think probably, if I'm being honest, we probably would have noticed that a lot quicker like, whereas obviously, at St Paul's, obviously, you've got volunteers in the church and stuff. But being on the monastic remains and things, it's a lot more self-led kind of thing. And so we saw that and thought, Okay, this is starting to like somebody sort of picked up this. And quite honestly, we decided the best option for that was not to engage with it, and to actually, you know, be able to tell our truth in the sense of, you know, actually how multicultural the site was, and things like that, because you can't, you can't control who comes on site. If they're just coming in as a normal person by sort of visiting stuff, you're not always going to know what their intentions are. But obviously, it wasn't something that we wanted to necessarily or felt at this time that we should be engaging with. But it was something that very much got put on our radar. And we were thinking, you know, actually, we need to be thinking ahead of this. And we need to be thinking how we tell the actual side of the story. And we again, it's debunking this kind of feeling. And this kind of notion that actually, this is, this is what it was, or are this, as you know, like the idealization that this is what we're promoting when we're absolutely not at all. And that, that history is so multicultural, and so sort of rich in events. And that's really important. (A07 52:27)

A07's hope that by not reacting to the incident she describes the organisation would be able to 'tell our truth' is a useful reminder that all heritage meanings are ultimately social constructs. These meanings are, however, constrained by the AHD and other interpretative communities (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 76-77) which act to privilege some meanings and delegitimise others. This process 'undermines the argument that a constructivist understanding of the character of knowledge inevitably leads to an extreme epistemological relativism' (2007, 79) and so denies the equivalence of meanings. A07's report of the use of an early

medieval site to support a political ideology acts to reinforce the continued relevance of studies into how heritage meaning is constructed and legitimised and, in the context of this study, confirms that the discourses which surround the interpretation of early medieval life are neither abstract nor irrelevant to wider societal discourse.

#### **d. Interpretative Authenticity**

##### **1. Material Authenticity**

The question of authenticity overtly presented itself at several case study sites not least when replicas, reconstructions or facsimiles were displayed. A far from comprehensive list might include the facsimile of the *Codex Amiatinus* and replica of the dedication stone from St Paul's church at Jarrow Hall, the replica of the Bewcastle monument at Durham, a facsimile of the Petrus stone at the Whithorn Visitor Centre, and the reconstructed high cross fragments at Whitby and Lindisfarne. These are, however, only examples of the material and a wider consideration of authenticity would wish to reflect on questions that emerge from the interpretation of the less tangible experiences, beliefs and emotions which point to lived experience of belief.

In current academic discourse, authenticity is, at best, a slippery concept to define. Edward Brunner (1994, 399-401) identifies three different usages based on concepts of mimetic credibility (verisimilitude), genuineness and originality while Tazim Jamal and Steve Hill (2004) also offer a threefold typology located around originality, constructed authenticity (that is objects, places and interpretations created to replace that which is now lost) and personal experience. Jan Penrose (2018) suggests a further three broad academic discourses which concern originality, a spontaneous existential response by the viewer (where 'it offers a glimpse of a fundamental self-understanding that gives rise to a feeling of existential truth' (2018, 1249)) and a symbolic or constructionist authenticity which is dynamic and contested.

The role of professionals also provides distinctive voices in these debates. Mary Brooks (2014) observes how the processes of conservation must have a voice in discussions around authenticity (a factor little considered in some claims for originality) and advocates that the decisions made by conservators should be made more visible to audiences to facilitate discussion over the nature of objects on public display. Concurrently, there is suspicion that, with the growth of mass tourism, consumer spending influences notions of what is authentic and what is not (Chhabra 2008) leading to the commodification and marketing of authenticity by heritage organisations (Hede et al 2014). While the suggestion of touristic experience being a source of authorisation of authenticity may seem abhorrent to some, the delegitimization of such performances may equally be seen as an expression of the AHD (Smith 2006, 73). Concurrently, a volume of literature points to visitor perceptions of authenticity as being key in securing a positive experiential outcome (Pearce and Moscardo 1986; Olson 2002; Ramkissoon and Uysal 2018, 98-109).

Types of authenticity may not be mutually exclusive (Hill and Cable 2006, 61) and just as there is overlap in theoretical taxonomies a single place or object may be the source of multiple, complimentary, authenticities. Although there is little firm ground in these debates by which to develop any overarching theorisation there are several handrails. Amongst these is the observation that much of the discussion is contextual (Brunner 1994, 400) and contingent on where the question is located and whose perception of authenticity is being considered. Furthermore, the process of defining and declaring authenticity is ultimately a demonstration of authority and power:

The more fundamental question to ask here is not if an object or site is authentic but rather who has the authority to authenticate, which is a matter of power - or to put it another way, who has the right to tell the story of the site. (Brunner 1994, 400)

Overall, this research did not allow for deeper investigations of any power dynamic within claims of authenticity although several observations supported the role of audiences in its definition and suggested multiple points of contention. Amongst these was an observed conversation between a visiting member of the public and the site director of the ongoing



excavations of the early medieval monastery on Lindisfarne, where the visitor was disputing the verbal interpretation they had been offered (Field Notes, 22 September 2022). It became apparent that two quite distinct perspectives were being expressed with different conceptions of authenticity and sources of authority being employed. Unfortunately, this anecdotal observation was uncontextualized although it does tentatively support claims of audience agency and suggests fruitful avenues for further research.

In the various publications intended as manuals for interpretation authors are largely silent about questions of authenticity, a feature replicated in the wider interpretative literature (Hill and Cable 2006). Although the reasons for this lie beyond the scope of this work, it is tempting to suggest that an interpretative planning process which has at its heart the question of what meaning does the institution wish to convey (Ham 2013, 20; Veverka 2016, 55-56) is likely to have already committed to the authenticity of its message. This implies a necessary blindness to the fact that any message, or interpretation, is ultimately a subjective construct ‘filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular time’ (Vogel 1991, 201). As Tim Copeland observes: ‘The ‘expert’ interpreter constructs a particularly personal account of the site – how could it be otherwise?’ (2006, 85). If there is not a blindness to such questions no interpretation would ever occur, weighed down by a multiplicity of themes and desired outcomes. Nonetheless, one of the duties of the institution is to alert the visitor to its inherent interpretative presumptions, biases, and preferences: ‘the museum must allow the public to know that it is not a broad frame through which the art and culture of the world can be inspected, but a tightly focused lens that shows the visitor a particular point of view’ (Vogel 1991, 201). This does not obviate a collaborative interpretive approach but rather suggests that such cooperations will have institutionally defined boundaries.

Locating this back into the case study sites use of replicas, the identification for audiences of objects as facsimiles was anticipated and that there would be some inclusion of this in interpretative schemes. No mislabelled objects were observed, although descriptions of facsimiles varied with identifiers such as ‘reconstruction’ at Jarrow Hall and ‘cast’ at Durham (both in the context of worked stone). Both examples were noted as a single word which

appeared as the final descriptor on the label defining the objects. This, of course, required the viewer to consume the entire script before the nature of the object was revealed. There was no sense on labels or panels that replicas themselves might have biographies.

Whilst authenticity is demonstrably a key element in audience satisfaction (Pearce and Moscardo 1986; Olson 2002; Ramkissoon and Uysal 2018, 98-109), the degree to which visitors had any pre-formed expectations that they would engage with replicas is uncertain. It seems axiomatic that the pre-existent knowledge which visitors bring shapes any anticipation of encounter and that different audiences demonstrate varying degrees of critical engagement with objects. This latter perspective was reported at Durham where B03 had engaged with a group of university students:

There are actually three replicas - the Acca cross, the Ruthwell, and the Bewcastle. One interesting thing, and this came up in a conversation I was having with the students last week, they actually thought there were more replicas. They'd particularly picked up on the Hartlepool name stone. They thought that was a replica because it was a different stone to all the others. They thought it was plaster. It's not It's Roker dolomite, limestone. And yes, it is very white. But they were surprised to find that there were only three replicas. Again, I think general visitors, when you compare replicas to the given that they're sitting next to real stones, I think most people pick up that they are replicas and as you see it in the labels, but what we then try to do is explain why there are replicas in with originals and their individual significance. (B03 47:02)

There was no apology for the display of replicas at Durham, indeed there was a belief that they were an important part of the collection with a forceful significance. This was located in the information that the replicas preserved, pointing to a different discourse to that of conservation and display whilst legitimising their place in the collection:

They [the casts] actually preserve a lot of details that have sadly now been lost on the originals. So, from an academic point of view, they are very important. You can read the runes, which are certain. The Bewcastle one, sadly, is very worn, very weathered. (B03 47:21)

I think it was originally Rosemary Cramp who took me around. I pointed to these two replica crosses, fibreglass crosses, and said 'they don't seem to fit here, all these lovely genuine Saxon and Norman stones and these replicas.' And she said, 'you've missed the important point here', which is that those replicas were created when information was legible on these crosses, that is no longer legible. So, they preserve information that is vital to preserve. And she won me round. I mean, there was still an issue for me of what is authentic and what isn't. But nevertheless, lost information, you know, that's precious, isn't it? That should be treasured. Hence the importance of them. There's no doubt that they kind of they dominate the array of stones in a very impressive sort of way. (B21 33:24).

A common feature at the case study sites was interpretation which included the mounting of fragments of worked stone in such a way to offer the viewer an impression of their original spatial properties. This included the placing of crossheads and shaft fragments on pillars and the use of frames to relocate displaced pieces of stone with each other (Figures 4.5 – 4.7).



Figure 4.5. Crossheads on Pillars. Durham Open Treasure. Ian Colson.





Figure 4.6. Cross Head Fragments held in a display frame. Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre.

Ian Colson.



Figure 4.7. Worked Stone displayed at Whithorn Priory Museum. Ian Colson.

The processes by which these designs came about was largely hidden. Professionals reported offering a design brief, which could reference what were perceived as successful interpretations in other organisations, and an indication of the outcomes they hoped to achieve. Designers would then return with a series of schemes which would include considerations of the aesthetic and pragmatic. Several design studios were unsuccessfully approached to take part in this research and so, unfortunately, this element of interpretative development remains occluded. The relationship between design practice and scholarship was uncertain, not least because most schemes predated the *in-situ* professionals who could only offer anecdotal reflections. It was therefore difficult to judge the accuracy of the claim that the primary aim in the modern display of worked stone is to allow audiences to engage with aesthetic values and meanings (Foster et al 2016, 83). Other, perhaps conflicting, interpretative aims have also been suggested, not least in the case of standing crosses, where the desire to facilitate the viewing of the detail of stone working (Foster et al 2016, 108) has needed to be balanced against the impression of monumentality and height (Foster 2003, 13; Yeoman 2005, 329). Nonetheless, despite these uncertainties, those professionals who had been involved in design processes maintained that primacy in considerations of authenticity lay with them.

A further consideration was that at Whithorn and Durham, and to a lesser extent at Lindisfarne and Kirkmadrine, stones from various locations and periods were placed closely together. No doubt the exigencies of conservation and available display space in part dictated this approach combined, perhaps, with an intent to allow side by side comparison. However, the removal of worked stone from the context of landscape is recognised as privileging an understanding of them as artefacts on display rather than being monuments with a significance located in time and place (Foster 2010), something accentuated by grouping often unrelated stones closely together. Nonetheless, Yeoman (2005, 329) reports resistance in the development of the Historic Environment Scotland scheme at Whithorn to a ‘key pieces’ approach which was rejected in favour of displaying the whole collection because each stone was judged as being of considerable individual significance. As mitigation, some preservation of meaning could, it was thought, be achieved through the thematic grouping of stones (2005, 329). Overall, a source of weakness in this research is that, with rare exceptions such as the published material from Whithorn, these internal discourses remain hidden. The

processes by which various actors bring together design pragmatism, scholarly insight, educational discourses, community outreach, commercial viability, funding criteria and interpretative intent (to name but a few) to bring schemes into being appears largely unresearched and poorly understood. It would, perhaps require an organisation with an unflinching commitment to transparency to allow a researcher to critically embed in, and report on, such conversations. This would, however, enable the understanding of the factors which combine to create exhibitions to move beyond published reviews of a finished product and allow a more informed, and potentially supportive, discourse.

A recent development in the discourse around replicas and facsimiles has been to observe that reproductions have a biography of their own. On Iona, a concrete replica of the 8<sup>th</sup> century St John's Cross, the fragments of which have been reassembled for display in the Abbey Museum, was erected in 1970 on the site of the original. Work by Sally Foster and Siân Jones (2020) demonstrated that the biography of the replica cross has become intertwined with the identities of several groups including those engaged in its construction, residents, pilgrims and other visitors. The conclusions that emerge from this work are far reaching and offer challenges to any simplistic discourses which equate authenticity solely with originality. Amongst these outcomes is the clear indication that if heritage management, including the delivery of interpretation, is to accurately represent values and meanings it must be located in consequential socially engaged practice. On Iona, the importance of the replica cross has been recognised both in terms of the significance of the history and materiality of the replica itself and in the social value placed upon it by intersecting communities. Combined, these factors led to the cross receiving listed Category A status in 2020 (Historic Environment Scotland 2024).

It was clear that professionals had an awareness of the biographies of some of the replicas in the case study collections and had given thought as to what meanings were attached to them and how audiences would perceive them. At Jarrow Hall, the facsimile of the *Codex Amiatinus* was a source of continued reflection in terms of its materiality, audience reception, and religious meaning:



I think it was probably before my time a little while, but I think it might have been as it was sort of just coming up to the museum, I don't know if it was the very latter days of Bede's World or it might have been, just as it was reopening...kind of 2016 sort of time period ish. And there was when it when it arrived, obviously, when it was clear that it had to be blessed, because it was agreed that even though it was a facsimile because it was a full-size facsimile. And because it had obviously all the text as was on the original, it was still a very, very special book. And so, it was agreed, obviously, that it was important to give it a proper blessing and to sort of have a little bit of a ceremony about it. And to sort of have it sort of travel across and up to the museum. Yeah. Which I thought was fascinating, because people I think sometimes, they think about facsimiles, and they think about copies and they sort of sit there and they go, Oh, that's just a copy. It's not the real thing. But then when you consider how special it is, and how much of a privilege it is to have even a facsimile of that document, especially being the only one that's actually in the UK, when it was produced, obviously, at the twin monastery is something quite special. (A07 25:53)

The facsimile was commissioned, after extensive fundraising, at a cost of nearly £40,000 and dedicated in St Paul's Church in 2016 during an ecumenical service after which it was processed to the then Bede's World Museum, accompanied by reenactors, academics and local civic dignitaries (Friends of Bede's World 2018). This complex of activity suggests that multiple layers of meaning were attached to the facsimile at this point of accession, the blessing alone creating a quasi-sacred object and reminiscent of the 2023 dedication of the Cuthbert memorial on Lindisfarne. Whether these meanings have continued to exert influence is, however, uncertain. Field work at Jarrow Hall was undertaken in the spring of 2023 and while the movement of visitors was noted only as a secondary aim, none were observed taking more than a cursory glance at the facsimile and its interpretation. The replica *Codex* was displayed in a case set into a wall to the right of an exit from the gallery concerned with the early monastery leading into a bright and airy rotunda. In the early phase of field work it was observed open with its coloured pages on display, however latterly it was closed (Figure 7.7) with only the cover visible. This, combined with its location in the gallery, a single frontal viewing perspective and its associated interpretation, seemed to offer little enticement to the visitor to engage with the object or with any wider meanings. Overall, A07's legitimate enthusiasm for the facsimile and its significance did not appear to be replicated in its display.



Figure 4.8. Closed replica of the *Codex Amiatinus*. Jarrow Hall, 29 April 2023. Ian Colson.

## b. Spiritual Authenticity

A feature which was intimated, but not explicitly observed nor which arose in interview, was a consideration of spiritual or religious authenticity. Crispin Paine suggests that religious objects on display in museums have ‘duties’ (2013, 11-12). Here, the object and institution

not only are required to offer an insight into the use and function of an artefact within the originating faith community, but there is also an imperative to acknowledge the significance with which that community continues to understand it. This does not necessarily mean that interpretation should be outsourced to faith groups, though it does question how authentic interpretation can be if those voices are not heard. This suggests that an interpretative authenticity is required to run alongside other authenticities, where a consideration must be given to the meanings given by faith communities complimenting the more pragmatic questions of conservation practice and display. This is, however, fraught with difficulty, not least in discerning which community should be consulted. Should, for instance and somewhat out of period, the conservation of medieval church wall paintings from the Catholic tradition be privileged over the whitewashed walls of successor Protestant communities when both can claim an equal authenticity? In the early medieval context, the Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican and Orthodox Churches may all lay some claim to being the inheritors of the legacy of the Northumbrian Church.

Professionals within this study seeking a dialogue with Christian communities appeared to rely on local clergy, even though they may have limited resource to speak authoritatively (Paine 2013, 27-28). However considerable resources are available elsewhere, for instance in the Catholic tradition through the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church (Holy See undated). Rooted in Thomistic theology, the Catholic approach locates authenticity in the life of the Church:

Accordingly, one is not able to hypostasize authenticity. From the theological perspective, it is a veiled sign of the superior celestial realities, for which it subsists in reference to a higher reality. Under the liturgical aspect, it provokes an aesthetic experience, which has to be congruous with the spiritual contemplation of the faithful. (del Rio Carrasco 2008, 39)

The consequence of this is that, under these terms of reference, questions of authenticity must be located in the continuing place of the object in the life of the Christian community. To be authentic the aim of conservation and use of an artefact must respect the sacrality of its

conception, placing it consistently back into the faith community from which it emerged. Outside of Durham Cathedral, however, faith communities were not reported to be part of everyday organisational discourse except at moments where some local consideration was required, such as the dedication of the Cuthbert memorial at Lindisfarne. Other than at Durham, there was no suggestion of artefacts having a continued life within a Christian sphere nor that religious authenticities were a consideration in operational decisions. This latter point was reinforced by several apparent conflections such as the development of a Dracula theme at Whitby Abbey and the celebration of the pagan feast of Beltane at Jarrow Hall (Figure 4.9). These are reflections of the complexities of heritage palimpsests and of sites juggling entangled modern meanings.



Figure 4.9. Advertisement for Beltane Celebrations at Jarrow Hall, April 2023. Ian Colson.

## **e. Christianity Problematised**

In observing a tendency to promote secular interpretations over those which are spiritual and religious, Gilchrist (2020, 5) demonstrates how the subalterning of any attempt to understand the lived experience of religion (McGuire 2008, 3-5) results in a profound loss of meaning. Nonetheless, a voiced opinion of some participants was that religious meanings were increasingly being side-lined in the wider heritage sector. None of the interviewees reported institutional policies specifically directed towards either the interpretation of religious artefacts and sites or the early medieval period but there was an undercurrent that faith was a difficult, if not contentious, area with which to engage. This was accompanied by claims that, in practice, aesthetic and historical themes were privileged over the religious, in part because they were easier to portray:

And there's a lot of areas in particular in regards to the religious aspect of things that maybe it [the interpretative scheme] doesn't touch on that much. Because I think probably there's been more of a sort of secular kind of look at sort of the art and the historic themes more than actually in the Bede era rather than the actual kind of meaning behind said objects (A07 05:51)

I think a lot of places get scared of tackling multifaceted natures of people, that people can have more than one nature in what they're doing. And I think, both on that approach, and just in general, I think a lot of institutions are scared of talking about faith in any depth. If it's a public institution, just, just, just run away from it. Make it as brief and as simple as possible. Because if you actually talk about the faith of [Northumbrians] you're getting into something that is difficult for people to comprehend, I think, especially if you've been taught to approach interpretation from quite a scientific analytical point of approach. (A05 38:17)

Of note was the experience of museum professionals who had worked in institutions such as St Mungo's in Glasgow, where there is a specific emphasis on the empathetic presentation of belief, who subsequently took on roles in other institutions and who claimed that other world religions were privileged over Christianity. Assisting with the curation of a significant art collection during a major re-development, one curator described how:

I had some quite negative experiences in that particular project, because I felt that there was a real secular agenda going on there. Now a lot of that was based on, you know, 'the [museum name] has a lot of religious objects, but we'll look at it from this angle and public consultation kind of has, you know, has shown that they're not interested in the topic or the subjects of the stained glass they are more interested in the colours'. That's absolutely fine. But what started to concern me was the way that Christianity seemed to be attacked, if you like, in a way that Islam and Chinese religions weren't and I thought there's something really strange going on here. And I think that I'm interested now in the ways in which kind of Christianity is seen as an easy whipping, erm, stool for things, a whipping boy for things in a way that other religions are seen as untouchable and that's slightly concerns me. So that was an experience I kind of had there and the way that people are okay to interpret some things but wouldn't touch other things for fear to get things wrong or fear to have a bit of cultural backlash. But other things like Christianity, the Church, are fair game for abuse and stuff. But, but and that's not because I'm defensive at all. It's just because I think it's, it's, I think it, it can cause a backlash, and it can alienate people who should be our allies, you know. (A01 24:53)

In this case there was no suggestion that this was an institutional policy, yet A01's observations suggest that other museum professionals openly displayed different behaviours when engaging with Christian history and artefacts. This accords with the observations made by Gilchrist (2020) and the dismissal of the eligibility of the faith of the past to have an authentic voice on the interpretative stage. It also supports a view that, in some institutions at least, the material and aesthetic qualities of artefacts may be privileged over other meanings. A22 observed that while this may have the effect of alienating believers, it also prevented outcomes which often lay at the heart of the conception of the artefacts themselves in that the interpretation prevented religious or spiritual responses:

...because of curatorial blind spots, they almost make a religious or a spiritual response impossible, as you know. But what it is about, you know, the art gallery hang a bunch of religious objects in the gallery I mean. ...the V and A Christian galleries, I mean, they have involved believers, but it don't get any sense that it enables a spiritual belief. I think that you'd get that better in the Buddhist galleries because Buddhism escapes the kind of secular anti-religious prejudice for some reason. Yes, it's been absorbed into the mindfulness culture and so you will get mindfulness events in the V and A, but you would never get Gregorian Chant meditation sessions or silent Christian meditation sessions. So, it's all full of contradictions. (A22 39:06)

Of the case study sites, Durham Cathedral's Open Treasure stood out as an example of an institution where Christian faith was de-problematized and celebrated. The exhibition was firmly linked with the mission of the Cathedral, which in turn held at its centre the mortal remains of Cuthbert, Oswald and Aidan. The values which this engendered were clearly expressed:

At the same time, within the context of the cathedral, we know there are certain beliefs, certain histories, and again, we will present them by the nature of our building of our foundation, we will always have a western Christian bias. But we're hopefully also open to discussing other approaches, other ideas, other viewpoints. (B07 29:00)

The question would be about other dynamics of religious faith and whether we are doing something similar to enable people to have an encounter and understanding an engagement with who Jesus Christ is? Because fundamentally, yes, we are a community in the location gathered around Cuthbert, but we gathered around Cuthbert gathering around the person of Jesus Christ. (B21 1:01:15)

The discourses in other institutions regarding Christian belief were more enigmatic, not least because of the traditional model of the museum somehow being a neutral space. The erection of a memorial (Fig 4.10) to Cuthbert by English Heritage in 2023 on the site of his medieval shrine at Lindisfarne was described by B09 (1:35:11) as coming about because Cuthbert was seen as having a particular regional significance, offering a focal point for local identity rather than being celebrated as an exemplar of Christian faith. The integrity of Cuthbert as a Christian monk, priest, bishop and evangelist is in this scheme largely negated. He becomes moderated and mellowed to broaden his appeal to wider audiences and to favour more contemporary, often environmental, concerns. Even still it was clear, though, that doubts remained within English Heritage over the commissioning of a memorial to a Christian saint:

...that's the one thing that exercised me a little tiny bit was this idea that we were we were thinking about a Christian, the Christian ideals and ideas within the setting that we really should be thinking about as a more of a more of a, you know, a wider denominational space in terms of, you know, a multid denominational space, but it's very difficult to you know, it's like getting most things in like, it's very difficult steer at that sort of path. (B09 1:35:28)



Yet, despite these qualms, clergy from Durham Cathedral, the Anglican parish church and other Christian denominations were invited guests at the unveiling of the memorial and Christian prayers of dedication were said (B09 1:35:11). Interviewees made it quite clear, however, that this monument was not a shrine, at least not in a religious sense, but in many ways this serves only to increase the ambiguity over how its agency is to be understood and how, in turn, this agency will come to be expressed. Overall, it serves as a reminder of the inherent difficulties of attempting to interpret fundamentally Christian themes in what in practice is a secular context.



Fig 4.10. Memorial to St Cuthbert, Lindisfarne Priory. Ian Colson.



## **f. Chapter Conclusions**

The aim of this chapter was to outline discourses that emerged from the data describing the genesis, practice, and experience of interpretation. In this, the theoretical scaffolding of the AHD has proved a useful tool, not least in suggesting mechanisms which might be employed in the control of meaning. Here aesthetic and architectural concerns are suggested as supressing other discourses, not least those voiced by groups considered to be subverting the AHD. Expressions of expertise were, however, observed to become more subjective and individualised when engaged with the more emotive meanings of spirituality, while participants maintained their primacy in the process of the delineation of authenticity.

Interpretation does not take place in a vacuum and any observations on interpretative outcomes must be contextualised within a broader framework of the necessary limitations of inherited buildings and interpretative schemes, further tempered by the inconveniences of resources and funding. It has been suggested that not only do both audiences and professionals hold changing religious capitals but that questions around religious heritage sit in an equally dynamic environment which reflects shifting attitudes. Heritage is thus confirmed as a capricious, politicised social construct. As demonstrated at Whitby, heritage sites are increasingly more about picnics and vampires than they are about synods and saints. This demonstrates a shift towards an emphasis on heritage places as arenas for leisure activities and points to new narratives providing sources of meaning and identity. While it may not be true of all the audience, interview participants reported the profile of religious heritage to be fading as society looks towards other sources for meaning. Such an outlook has traction in most of the heritage contexts surveyed and, Durham Cathedral aside, there was uncertainty over what can or cannot be said about historic Christian belief in a diverse and growingly secular society.

The weight of interpretation that was observed was textual with a relatively modest use of other mediums. This may be a reflection on the difficulties in conveying religious concepts and ideas to visitors, who may be encountering them for the first time, emerging from a professional discernment of the need to employ didactic approaches to adequately embrace

complexity. Conversely, however, it might be argued that complexity needs to be met with a spread of interpretative approaches to increase the opportunities that multivalent audiences have in the creation of meaning. These entanglements might be why some of the most interesting questions that arise from this period, not least those around the experience of the conversion, the motivations for entry into monastic life and the lived experience of early medieval belief were largely unexplored. It is to these questions that subsequent chapters will turn.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETING THE NORTHUMBRIAN CHURCH

### a. Introduction

This chapter will review the wider themes which emerged in the heritage presentation of the role and place of the Northumbrian Church. In addition to interview and autoethnographic material it will use evidence from the various displays, information boards and guidebooks of the case study sites. As will be noted, digital interpretation was found to be limited both in terms of the volume of resources and in the depth of detail provided. Printed guides were available at the two English Heritage sites at Whitby Abbey (Brindle 2020) and Lindisfarne Priory (Story 2005), where the 2005 guidebook pre-dates the revised 2023 exhibition, and the Historic Environment Scotland site at Whithorn (Cox, Gall and Yeoman undated). The National Museum of Scotland offers *Early Medieval Scotland: Individuals, Communities and Ideas* (Clarke et al 2012) which places the majority of the Museum's displayed early Christian artefacts in a wider Scottish context, though this is a substantial book both in terms of size and cost and so not apparently designed for on-site use by visitors. The Whithorn Trust publish a variety of pamphlets based on the annual Whithorn Lecture series, but these appear largely directed towards a specific, archaeologically inclined, audience and do not constitute a single volume guide. No guidebooks were observed at Jarrow Hall (albeit a guide was produced for its previous incarnation as Bede's World (Bede's World 2004)) nor at the Whitby Town Museum though St Paul's Church, Jarrow, did offer a single A4 sheet folded guide. Finally, a variety of publications have been produced about Durham Cathedral and were available in the cathedral shop, but none was observed as being offered to visitors entering the Cathedral or the current Open Treasure exhibition.

Five themes will be reviewed in this chapter. Firstly, the interpretation of the process of conversion will be examined, with emphases on the Christian traditions present in Britain and the role of elites in the Christianisation of Northumbrian society. Secondly, the development of the monasteries will be considered in terms of the presentations of monastic topography and layout and their wider role as debated in the so-called minster hypothesis. The interpretation of the place of the Church in society will be viewed through lenses concerned with authority, power and literacy followed by a discussion of the heritage presentation of

romanitas as a social and ecclesiological driving force. Finally, the interpretation of the end of the period will be reviewed, not least that regarding Viking incursion.

In reviewing the various interpretative schemes at the six case study sites it is important to note that such interpretations are constricted on all sides by practical issues such as space, resources, and, as visitor attractions, a need for some financial viability. While web-based material may be relatively easily revised, physical interpretations are often expected to have a life of a decade or more and this makes them vulnerable to shifting audience attitudes and scholarly development, both archaeological and historical, with little opportunity to acknowledge changing understandings in exhibitions and displays. Heritage professionals are acutely aware of these deficiencies yet have limited scope for the revision of extant schemes. The following observations are therefore intended to convey some of the challenges brought about by these various constraints rather than being a clumsy unveiling of professional inactivity.

## **b. The Expansion of Christianity**

### **1. British, Irish and Roman Christianity.**

The process by which Christianity came to dominate Northumbria continues to be a source of considerable scholarly interest. With limited written sources and a sparse material record, the 5<sup>th</sup> century Church in the British Isles is largely occluded and the degree of influence which an extant British Church had in the polity and ultimate conversion of Anglian society is a source of academic debate. Broadly, two opinions are advocated (Petts 2016, 675): firstly, that the 4th century brought a period of consolidation for the Church which allowed for self-reliance and adaptation to the new circumstances of the 5<sup>th</sup> century (Thomas 1981; Petts 2003, 20-24) and thus opening the possibility of some form of continued role and influence in incipient Bernicia and Deira over later decades or, secondly and conversely, that an over reliance on the failing mechanisms of Roman imperial governance led to a fundamental collapse of ecclesial structures which left a Romano-British Christian remnant as an inconsequential liminal actor in an emerging Anglian society (Frend 1979, 143-144.) This

latter position, however, requires a judgement on the lacuna of evidence for any sustained missionary endeavour emerging from the Church in Gaul towards Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, where an interaction between the two is evidenced both in the written and material record (Mayr-Harting 1972, 34-35; Thomas 1981, 271; Blair 2005, 10-11; Petts 2003, 47 & 2014) and which is predominately understood as being relational rather than transactional (Petts 2016, 675). Equally, there may be a need to better understand Bede's animosity towards the British Church and so view it as neither a spent nor hidden force but rather one which presented at least some challenge to the Anglian ecclesial settlement (Trent Foley and Higham 2009).

There is little historical or material evidence of the relationship between the extant British population and developing Anglian elite in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries nor any clear indication of the degree to which any sub-Roman British population was Christianised. Some scholars envisage a substantial Christian population in pre-conversion Northumbria and point to factors such as the Anglian monastery at Melrose being the successor to a British house (Brooks 1991, 108). However, possible regional variations in the sub-Roman Christian population create considerable uncertainties (Petts 2016, 676) although a pre-existent Christian base may account, at least in part, for the speed of the conversion. Much of this debate, however, depends on the degree of displacement or absorption of the indigenous British population by Anglian settlers, an area of continuing investigation (e.g. Montgomery et al 2005; Gretzinger et al 2022), and the level to which Christian beliefs and structures survived this process.

Overall, the sub-Roman Church received relatively little interpretative reference at the six case study sites. It did not appear, however, that this was through any deliberate professional decision informed by the academic debates around the vivacity of continuing Christian life. Where the Church was mentioned, primarily at Jarrow Hall and the Whithorn Trust, the Roman origins of Christianity were acknowledged though framed in the context of decline and abandonment:

When the Romans left and their structured government disintegrated, British and Irish Christians developed an organisation based on rural monasteries rather than Roman cities. Over time, they evolved practices which differed from those of Roman Christians. (Panel, Jarrow Hall)

Visitors were unlikely to be introduced to the view that a continuity of Christian presence through the British Church could be demonstrated and that links with Rome, at least through Gaul (Mayr-Harting 1972, 34-35; Blair 2005, 10-11) and Ireland (Yorke 2006, 109-114; Edmonds 2020), persisted. This raised challenges at Whithorn where, even though the Latinus Stone is dated by Historic Environment Scotland to around 450 (Cox, Gall and Yeoman undated, 20), audiences were given little help in constructing meanings in the period between the end of Roman Britain and 7<sup>th</sup> century Northumbrian expansion despite a secure placing in some form of Romanised context (Forsyth 2005, 115-117). This could, perhaps, be remedied through enhancing the interpretation of the Kirkmadrine stones and promoting their importance in the creation of an understanding of sub-Roman Christianity in southern Scotland. No suggestion was made of Galloway's place in a wider Insular religious economy (Edmonds 2020, 120-126) leading to an impression that Whithorn and Kirkmadrine were isolated islands of Christian belief.

The 597 Augustinian mission was referenced at several sites, often with the attendant suggestion that this was the reassertion of Roman Christianity. When this occurred, the picture painted was one of a two-pronged approach – Augustine moving from the south while Columba evangelised outwards from Iona (e.g. English Heritage Whitby guidebook (Brindle 2020, 26-27)). Again, the pre-existing British Church received little mention, possibly reflecting a cautious hesitancy over a period which remains largely historically and archaeologically hidden and where academic discourses are uncertain. Equally, it may speak to the challenges in presenting complex themes. A further factor may be that the popular view of a total societal collapse in the 5<sup>th</sup> century is so prevalent that to challenge it without extensive interpretation risks the alienation of segments of the audience because of the new paradigm required. However, as John Blair notes, 'the familiar image of the British Church as eccentric, introverted, and feeble should be rejected...Rather than an idiosyncratically 'Celtic' Church, we should envisage a continuing Roman one limited by the peculiarly severe collapse of material civilisation around it' (2005, 11).

Unlike British Christianity, the Irish tradition was frequently referenced at sites and in guidebooks. It was rare, though, for any attempt to be made to describe what made this tradition distinctive other than references to tonsures and the calculation of the date of Easter, most frequently in wider discussions of the Synod of Whitby, nor why such differences had come about. Instead, reference was made to a ‘simple’, liminal, spirituality:

Some differences between the two traditions of Christianity, such as the form of a monk’s tonsure, may seem trivial to us; but the method of calculating the date of Easter was a fundamental issue and the subject of passionate disagreement. (Panel, Jarrow Hall)

This Irish style of Christianity associated with Columba taught that religion should be kept simple. Believers often went to remote islands to live as hermits and erected very simple crosses. (Panel, National Museum of Scotland).

The romanticised portrayal of early medieval monasteries from the Irish tradition as aesthetic, eremitical places, strategically located to accentuate isolation whilst being open to the Divine through an encounter with nature, was a firmly embedded trope in the observed interpretations. This may be critiqued through the lens of the analysis of modern ‘Celtic’ spirituality (Bradley 2018) with the attendant observation that such interpretations speak more to contemporary concerns than allowing the fullest of interpretative constructions. The breadth of Irish early medieval Christianity (Hughes 1966) shows that a simplistic model of a monolithic Irish tradition is erroneous and potentially misleading, evidenced in the varied ways in which it calculated Easter and its own *romanitas* (e.g. Corning 2006, 81-82, 96-99; Ó Carragáin 2010, 8-9). This lack of development of Irish themes may be indicative of an unfamiliarity amongst non-specialist professionals with the relevant scholarship or conversely could be a judgement over the allocation of resource in finite interpretative schemes.

The interpretative paradigm was somewhat confused at Durham, Whithorn (both at the Whithorn Trust Visitor Centre and the Whithorn Priory Museum) and the National Museum

of Scotland by references to ‘Celtic’ traditions. It was not made clear for the visitor what this meant and whether it was a geographical, theological, or linguistic construct (or indeed a combination of all three). This free usage suggests an interpretative confidence in the cultural assimilation of the meaning of Celticism in the audience’s mind. The English Heritage guidebook for Lindisfarne Priory conflates the Irish and ‘Celtic’ Churches (Story 2005, 22) while that for Whitby Abbey refers to Celtic missions, traditions, and Church together with a Celtic ‘side’ at the Synod of Whitby (Brindle 2020, 26-28). This latter usage is, however resolutely defended:

Referring to Hild’s minster, and to Bishop Colman’s side at the Synod of Whitby, as Irish or Ionan would, however, risk creating confusion. The term ‘Northumbrian’ would be even more unclear as this could be used to describe Streanshalch both before and after the Synod. For this reason the term ‘Celtic’ is used throughout this guidebook, but it is important to note that, in academic circles, what appears to be a conveniently simple term is now regarded by some as outmoded. (Brindle 2020, 26)

Quite how the use of ‘Irish’ would cause confusion is uncertain and it is used throughout the interpretative panels at Whitby Abbey, the site for which the guidebook was written. B52 reported that the use of ‘Celtic’ had been a point of discussion in establishing the interpretative scheme and had been informed by academic perspectives:

(Researcher: were there deliberate conversations in that area?) The main area was the use of the word Celtic. And, obviously, you'll be aware that that massive arguments in the last five years or so as to what the connotations of Celtic are and when it might be inappropriate to use it or appropriate to use it. I don't think the word Celtic appears anywhere, it's Irish, or Irish influence. (B52 1:08:39).

That the same organisation could hold divergent interpretative positions is of note. It suggests something of the complexity of the internal discourses through which interpretative schemes come about, especially in large bodies with a spread of perspectives and disciplines. Equally, it may also point to conflicting viewpoints, an issue which emerged in several interviews where some professionals were highly critical of the interpretations proposed by others within their own institutions.



At several sites, a further distinction between Christian practices was made by the introduction of the concept of 'Roman' Christianity which was generally used as a descriptor for any ecclesial feature which was judged to reference Rome. It was far from certain what visitor understanding was anticipated with this usage as there was little to subvert connections being made with the understandable, yet problematic, assumption that this referred to the Roman period in Britain or perhaps even modern Roman Catholicism. The use of 'Roman' Christianity may be as contestable as the use of 'Celtic' in that it introduces unfounded binaries into what was a melting pot of influences (Blair 2005, 5) and if nomenclature is required 'Gallic' may be preferred, certainly outside of Augustine's mission (Yorke 2006, 121-122). However, the suggestion of the influence of Gaul and Francia more generally in the Northumbrian church was observed only three times in on-site interpretation, once at Whithorn as the source of a mission to Galloway and twice at Jarrow Hall where Gaul provided masons and vestments. Other than these three occasions, 'Roman' was used throughout and this usage is reflected here.

This Roman Christianity was largely introduced in the context of the Synod of Whitby and portrayed as direct consequence of Augustine's evangelistic activity in Kent. The Frankish Christian presence in Canterbury predating Augustine (Yorke 2006, 121) was unrecorded. Other than a single reference at Jarrow Hall, no mention of Paulinus' mission to Edwin's court was observed at any of the case study sites. However, both the guidebooks for Whitby Abbey (Brindle 2020) and Lindisfarne (Story 2005) note this first Bernician missionary phase. Brindle (2020, 27) describes Paulinus' mission as being 'resisted' by the Anglian population though Bede's claims of mass baptism (HE II 14), which might point to a different reception, is referenced by Story (2005, 21) alone. The continuation of the Augustinian mission after Edwin's death through the work of James the Deacon, and the operation of the Deiran churches of the Apostle Peter in York and St Paul in Lincoln (HE II 20), was not reflected at any case site nor in the associated guides.

Overall, the presentation in the observed interpretative schemes of the Roman, British and Irish Churches can be judged as being historically problematic for two reasons. Firstly, in presenting them as monolithic and immutable, many heritage interpretations do not reflect the

internal diversity of these traditions and their development over time (Pluskowski and Patrick 2003, 34-37) nor the localisms of intellectual communities (Pluskowski and Patrick 2003, 30; Carver 2011). The everyday lived experience of Christianity likely varied from place to place, and such variation was not simply geographic but also changed over time. To contextualise this with a single example, the penultimate Sixth Ecumenical Council, the Third Council of Constantinople (Cross and Livingstone 1983, 340) did not take place until 680 and so the doctrine concerning the will of Christ, a key piece in the Christological jigsaw, was not fully framed at the time of the Synod of Whitby nor the Council at Hertford. That something as central to modern Christian belief as Christology had a degree of fluidity in the 7<sup>th</sup> century is a reminder that doctrine, and the meaning it created, was dynamic and developing across the whole Church. The work of generations of scholars suggests that the 7<sup>th</sup> century Church was very different to that of the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> and so it is historically problematic to portray the Church as being static during a period when it demonstrably changed and evolved. The differentiation of the Christianity of the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries and the more regimented and static later middle ages is one more interpretative challenge amongst many.

Secondly, the observed interpretations consistently portrayed the relationship between the British, Roman and Irish Churches as adversarial, especially in the context of the Synod of Whitby. While Bede's criticism of the British Church is clear (e.g. EH II 2) a more nuanced reading suggests several inherent anomalies which discourage simplistic dualisms. For example, British bishops are described as taking part in Chad's (d. 672) consecration as Bishop of the Northumbrians following the Synod of Whitby (EH III 28), which points to a British inclusion in a wider ecclesial economy (Stancliffe 2007, 14 -15). This engagement was only fully lost when the British dating of Easter became heretical rather than idiosyncratic under the direction of Archbishop Theodore (Stancliffe 2007,16). Likewise, the demonstrable coexistence of the Irish and Roman traditions post-Whitby points to a more gradual drifting apart after 664 rather than the immediate drawing up of hardened battlelines (Stancliffe 2017).

Allusions to a wide spread of differences between the Irish and Roman traditions were observed as a mechanism to support a significant distinction but they were largely undefined:

The Synod of Whitby, a meeting of Church leaders, gathered here at Hild's monastery in 664. Oswiu ruled in favour of the customs and traditions of Rome, leaving the Irish customs and traditions behind. (Panel, Whitby Abbey).

The Celtic and Roman traditions differed in many respects, such as their clothing and the way they wore their hair, but the most important difference was the way they calculated Easter. (Brindle 2020; 27-28).

It is notable that, although Bede refers to 'other ecclesiastical matters' as part of the deliberations of the Synod (EH III 25), it is only the date of Easter and the tonsure that he specifies. This would suggest that Bede viewed the importance of these other differences as being minimal. In a similar way, Stephanus in his *Life of Wilfred* only records the date of Easter as being the point of debate (Ch 10) and with Bede frames it in the context of the acceptance of Papal authority (Higham 1997, 256 -258). In suggesting other significant differences, some interpreters may be attempting to aid visitors in their construction of meaning because tonsures and the date of Easter may appear to be relatively trivial matters to modern audiences and somewhat inconsequential points of disagreement. The introduction of other, unspecified, disputes provide a gravitas which supports an interpretative inclination to present the Synod as in some way pivotal (discussed below). This, however, fails to address the more pertinent theme of authority, which gives much greater insight into the Synod, and so may do the visitor a disservice in trying to suggest that modern judgements of relative importance map directly onto those of the past.

In approaching the differing traditions of the early Northumbrian Church, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that visitors, and perhaps professionals, might draw analogies with the modern understanding of there being Christian denominations. 'Denomination' can be characterised as a sociological categorisation, an attempt to differentiate between forms of ecclesial governance and polity to produce a taxonomy of churches that is comprehensible in

contemporary discourse and so avoids the need to make theological judgements in a post-modern milieu (Avis 2013, 23). However, not only do modern churches reject these organisationally driven typologies (Ensign-George 2013, 2) there is little evidence to suggest that this is how the early medieval mind understood different Christian expressions either. The modern ecclesial rejection of sociologically derived taxonomies centres around the conviction that differences in governance are entirely secondary to first order matters of belief and so, in a modern theological context, churches comprehend other churches through similarities that legitimise broad groupings of traditions (Houlden 1983, 173). This seems a probable model for the 7<sup>th</sup> century Church where commonalities included not only belief but also the praxis of the liturgical use of Latin, holy orders, an episcopal structure, monasticism and the Sacraments, to name but a few. It is in this way that Bede can condemn the Irish and British churches in what they do, but not necessarily for who they are. This points to yet another interpretative challenge in that what might appear to be a helpful taxonomic approach, and one which may already be familiar to audiences, may not be necessarily transferable.

## **2. The Conversion of Elites**

The role of kings and societal elites in the conversion process received consideration in a majority of observed interpretative schemes. As noted above, generally little reference was made to Edwin's conversion nor the missionary activities of Paulinus in Northumbria. The most comprehensive coverage was observed at Jarrow Hall, perhaps because of it having the largest display space and so a greater freedom to develop themes. Edwin's conversion was described as coming about after a 'long hesitation' but the reason for his decision is left open. The context given in the interpretation is, however, suggestive that it was for the political end of achieving an alliance with the Kingdom of Kent:

Initially Edwin had the protection of Raedwald of East Anglia, the most powerful king in England. But when Raedwald died, Northumbria was threatened by the rising power of the West Saxons. Edwin allied with the King of Kent, then the only

Christian king in England, by marrying his daughter Athelburh. She brought a Roman Christian bishop, Paulinus, to Northumbria. Bede tells the story of Edwin's conversion. After long hesitation, he became a Christian following victory in battle against the West Saxons. (Panel, Jarrow Hall).

This places King Edwin's conversion within a transactional narrative, where the adoption of the Christian faith was a pragmatic move because it brought a political alliance with 'the most powerful king in England'. An understanding of conversion as a pragmatic, rather than religious, paradigm is a common theme in academic discourse and tends to support Gilchrist's assertion of the privileging of secular narratives (2020, 7-8):

[The] starting point [of this book] is the proposition that first-generation Christian kings did not share the world-picture, value systems or beliefs of the missionaries who they protected and patronised. In that case, their purposes cannot be explained by reference to a commitment to spreading the spiritual message of Christianity. What is under examination, therefore, is the utility of religious affiliation to the ambitions of secular rulers (Higham 1997, 1).

In this model, Christianity was an imposition by elites on Anglian society so that they could achieve heightened degrees of control over populations, not least by appeals to Biblical models of divinely legitimised and empowered kingship (Higham 1997, 28-34; Yorke 2014, Higham and Ryan 2015). There is, however, a lack of scholarly consensus over the accuracy of this model and alternative theories include that suggesting that the conversion of Northumbrian kings was a response to conversions within the Bernician and Deiran elites so that control could continue to be exerted in a new, Christian, paradigm (Pickles 2018, 95-96). It may also be that the authority of Anglo-Saxon kings and their ability to enforce a widespread religious realignment has been overestimated, and that the transformation of belief was instead a contingent and negotiated process located in individual communities (Pickles 2019).

In advancing a top-down conversion Higham (1997, 7) leans heavily on Durkheim's claim that religion should be understood as a social process (2016). In doing this, however, Higham

does not have the benefit of later work (e.g. Allan and O'Boyle 2017, 124-131) which is critical of Durkheim's use of colonialist perspectives which distort his analysis of conversion. In a similar way, there is a legacy in post-processual archaeology of having sought theoretical scaffolding from anthropological descriptions of conversion which overlook the colonialist and neo-colonialist outlooks on which many of these descriptions rest (Petts 2011, 74-77). In terms of the early medieval, these critiques invite reflection on some of the assumptions which may underlie historical interpretations of the conversion process.

The written interpretation at Jarrow Hall suggested that conversion could bring political advantage for kings:

Close ties developed between Church and Crown. King Oswald and his successors came to regard themselves as protectors of the Church and saw it could give authority to their rule. (Panel, Jarrow Hall).

This was the single instance observed at the case study sites where conversion was explicitly linked with political advantage. A more likely interpretative portrayal was one which, while acknowledging links between the Church and elites, saw these as being concerned primarily with spiritual benefit rather than temporal power:

Religion, wealth and power. There were close links between the Christian church and political rulers. Aristocratic leaders and people of influence offered the Church physical protection and support. In return the Church provided spiritual protection and guidance. (Panel, National Museum of Scotland).

The monastery had the patronage and protection of the kings of Northumbria. The position of king was often a contested and risky one in Anglo-Saxon England. These leaders believed that by supporting Christian institutions they would gain protection against divine punishment for their sins - it was their route to heaven. (Panel, Lindisfarne Priory).

This development of spiritual benefit is notable in that it offers a very different perspective to understandings concerned purely with political expediency. Furthermore, the interpretation from Lindisfarne de-objectifies the kings to which it refers. It allows an insight into rulers who lived a precarious existence, whilst allowing them to have hopes, fears and beliefs and in this revivifies them. It could be suggested that the emphasis on the spiritual, found on these and other panels, has come about because of the difficulties of interpreting the complexities of the drivers for conversion and as a way of avoiding the referencing of an unresolved academic debate. This may in part be true, but, at Lindisfarne at least, it has not nullified the opportunity for the construction of meanings which move beyond expressions of power and control.

### **c. The Monasteries**

#### **1. Minsters**

The minster hypothesis (Cambridge and Rollason 1995, 87) raises several questions for heritage interpreters. The pastoral role that the monasteries played in Anglian society (Foot 1992; Cambridge and Rollason 1995; Blair 2005, 160-166; Cubitt 2009) points to different institutions to those portrayed in popular tropes of spiritual isolation from the outside world. The debate is reflected in how *monasterium* should be translated: as ‘monastery’ or ‘minster’ or even left undeciphered (Foot 1992). The use of ‘monastery’ may encourage the overlay of later Benedictine norms on places which were quite unlike their successors in both form and function (Cambridge and Rollason 1995, 88-89). A convincing argument can be made for the use of ‘minster’ not least because it allows for the construction of a meaning which is specific to the early medieval period and allows for a variety of forms and functions (Blair 2005, 3-4). ‘Monastery’ was, however, used on panels and displays at all sites, and the only mention of ‘minster’ was in connection with York Minster in a passing reference at the Whitby Town Museum. Despite this, a reference in the guidebook for Whitby Abbey succinctly captured the debate:

The word minster can refer to a large church, but is also used to describe religious communities in Anglo-Saxon England, in order to distinguish them from the monasteries founded after the Norman Conquest of 1066. These monasteries, like the later one at Whitby, were very different in their organisation and culture from the earlier minsters. (Brindle 2020, 3).

Whilst a helpful acknowledgement of an academic discourse, this explanation gives an impression of a single point of transition between two static monastic expressions. This runs the danger of the wealth of monastic phenotypes that existed between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries (Blair 2005, 291) becoming homogenised into a single entity. In advocating an ‘Anglo-Saxon England’ a modern geographical and taxonomic overlay is placed upon the early medieval period and the palimpsest brought about by things as varied as regional variations, monastic reform, the urbanisation of monasteries and the development of different forms of lay patronage and control is occluded. However, the intent behind guidebooks is often multivalent, ranging from the deepening of interpretative schemes through to the offering of a revenue raising souvenir (Stausberg 2010, 199-204). Equally, the way in which visitors engage with guides may also vary and is dependent on context and the degree of individual user engagement (Therkelsen and Sorensen 2005). The function of this passage from the Whitby guidebook would seem to be one of concisely bringing together complex and dynamic academic discourses and accessibly conveying them to a general audience. In this it may be judged as being successful. Perhaps the best outcome which can be achieved when attempting to convey complexities of this sort is to invite the reader to follow through on their own interests, an area where layered digital interpretation would seem to be particularly apposite.

## **2. Monastic Buildings**

Some visitors may have a degree of familiarity with the so-called ‘standard’ medieval monastic plan (Butler and Given-Wilson 1979, 63-72). Here, it might be expected that a



church would sit adjacent to a cloister with the various claustral buildings gathered around each with a specific role and function. The lack of standardisation of early medieval monasteries, however, poses interpretative challenges. Although claims can be made for common themes in monastic topography through the evident attraction of rivers and headlands (Foot 2006, 47; Pickles 2011) little can definitively be said of early monastic plans except for the presence of a vallum (Blair 2005, 196-198; Foot 2006, 96-106), axially aligned churches (Blair 2005, 199; Foot 2006 111-113; Gittos 2013, 64-68), and zoning around nuclei (Blair 2005, 199; Petts and Turner 2009) which may be relational to cemeteries, sometimes with focal graves (Hill 1997). Many excavated sites appear polyfocal and thus quite unlike any hypothetical standardised later plan (Hill 1997; Petts 2017a). The relationship between church buildings and their liturgical function remains uncertain (Petts and Turner 2009, 288-289; Gittos 2013, 97-101) and while a pattern of dedication may be observed (Blair 2005, 200; Gittos 2013, 94-97) multiples of churches is suggestive of liturgical ‘compartmentalisation’ (Blair 2005, 201), where individual spaces have discrete functions. Excavation at Whithorn suggests that some may have acted as mortuary chapels (Hill 1997, 45). More widespread identification elsewhere is confounded by the difficulties in differentiating between high status secular buildings, monasteries and churches, not least in the post-conversion period when construction in wood was normative and even royal buildings could be appropriated for ecclesiastical use (Blair 2005, 204-212; 2018, 131-136).

The interpretation of the monastery at Whithorn offered by the Whithorn Project follows Hill’s 1997 excavation report in suggesting clearly defined areas and a ‘planned layout’. Elsewhere, English Heritage’s Whitby Abbey scheme was less confident, shying away from a description of the site and describing instead the type of buildings that may have been found:

There are no visible remains; however, there would have been a church, separate accommodation for the monks and nuns, a refectory, and a guest house. Accounts from the time describe an infirmary and a house for novices (individuals training for the monastic life). In the 11th century 40 stone huts from the Anglo-Saxon monastery, used for private prayer and work, were still standing on the site. (External Information Panel, Whitby Abbey).

Of note here is an apparent alignment to Peers and Radcliffe's interpretation (1943, 29) of small cells over the subsequent analysis by Rahtz (1973 & 1996) who identified larger buildings and there may also be an implied acceptance of the normativity of Bede's description of individual cells at Coldingham (EH IV 25). At the English Heritage managed Jarrow site, excavation of Biscop's monastery (Cramp 1996 & 2005) was strongly suggestive of communal buildings in a proto-claustral arrangement which may reflect continental practice. Here, excavated wall lines are marked on the ground in contrasting paving to differentiate between different phases of building (Fig 5.1) though this effect is complicated by the presence of later standing walls. As the different phases of medieval building are undifferentiated, however, a somewhat confusing impression is given of the run of these walls which sometimes appear to conflict with each other and not respect standing masonry. This is clarified by four interpretative panels on the site, one of which offers a coloured plan of the wall lines (Fig 5.2) while others display illustrative reconstructions of the monasteries of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. One panel places graphics of the early and later monastery adjacent to each other and so invites a direct comparison while introducing the suggestion that Biscop's buildings were likely two storied. The panel displaying the plan suggests 8<sup>th</sup> century building functions, identifying a refectory, hall, guesthouse, kitchen and a 'cell' and so uses the interpretations offered in Cramp's post-excavation report (1996).

In a similar way, the interpretation at Whitby Abbey suggests the presence of an early medieval refectory, guesthouse, infirmary and novitiate which are also described as features of the later abbey (Brindle 2020). Whether this approach encourages audiences to conceptualise an exact equivalence in form and function is uncertain and suggests an avenue for further research. Equally, how accessible these descriptions are for general audiences is unknown, although as a standardised terminology it may be somewhat condescending to visitors not to use them. Again, layered digital interpretation, where differences and definitions could be explored, may prove a useful interpretative tool on these sites.





Figure 5.1. Wall Lines at Jarrow. Early medieval walls are shown by paving, later walls by cobbles. The different phases of medieval building are not differentiated and thus appear to run over each other and underneath standing masonry. Ian Colson.



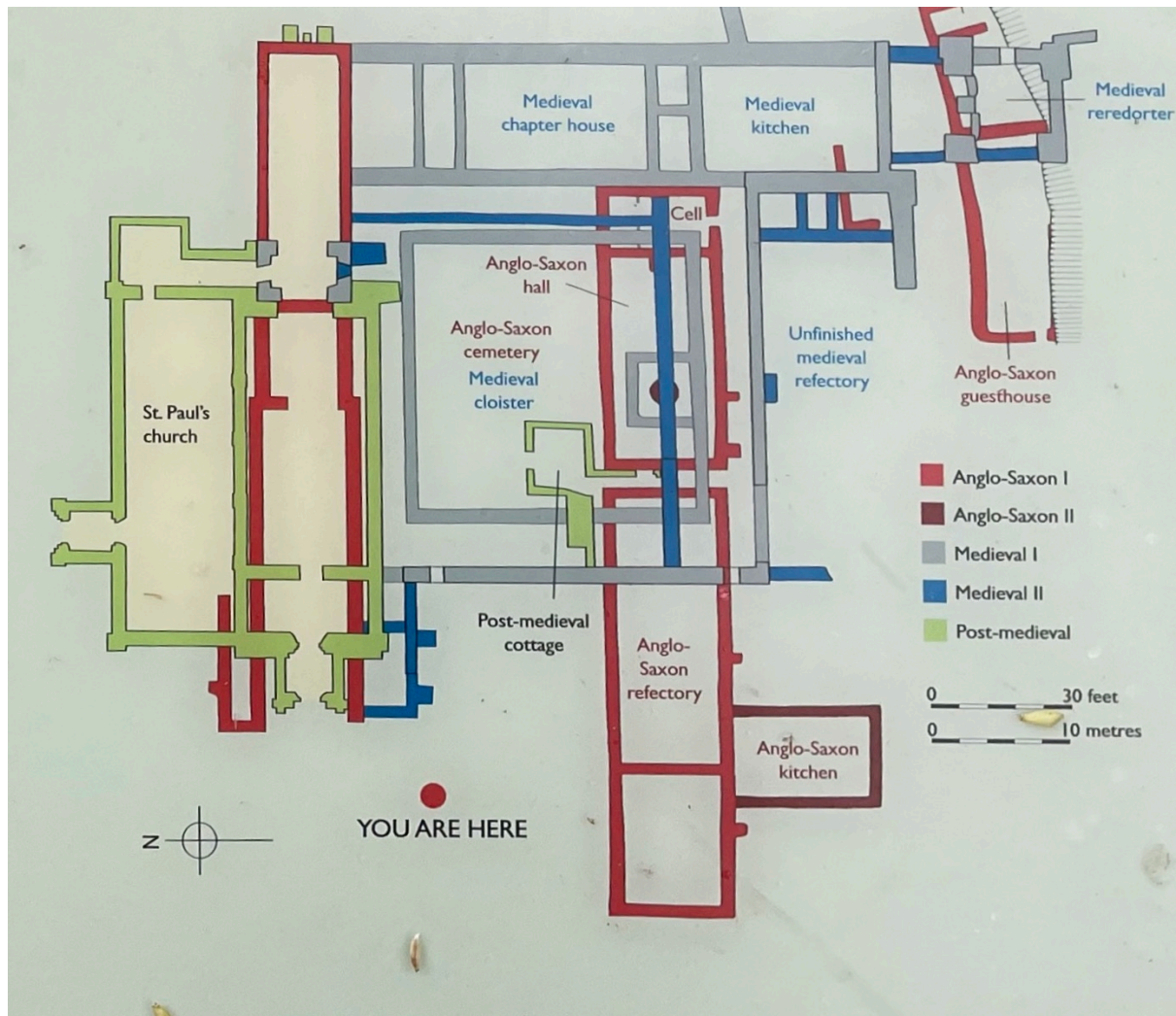


Figure 5.2. Orientation Plan, Jarrow. Ian Colson.

The question of how to interpret the complex multi-phase site at Lindisfarne was reported to have been challenging:

Anyway, Lindisfarne was an odd amalgam of various people's interpretation of what they thought was right. And I spent an awful long time correcting an awful lot of stuff that was written ...you know even our people misinterpreted what they talked about and what things were and I had to go back and say 'you'll find that this didn't actually exist until this point'. And that was sad because there are going [to] be people [who] come along with a basic packet of knowledge and they presume this is correct for all periods of time. (B09 39:01).

This last point is suggestive of the need for a deconstruction of the understanding that some parts of the audience bring with them as they visit Lindisfarne. Overall, the case study sites reinforced that not only does the early medieval need to be disentangled from later monastic expressions, but that each of the sites have quite different evidential bases and historical biographies. There are areas of real uncertainty over what these places looked like and what happened in them, not to mention how they were understood, and this makes them difficult to interpret:

While the conventual life was ... central to the expression of Christianity in early Anglo-Saxon England, a good deal of confusion still seems to surround not just the nature of these religious houses, but also the language most appropriately to be employed to describe them' (Foot 1992, 213)

With there being no single narrative around the form of Anglian monasteries, but the certainty that they changed over time, interpreters have the task of trying to deconstruct the understanding which some visitors might bring that are informed by knowledge of the standard plan of a medieval monastery (e.g. Butler and Given-Wilson 1979, 63-72) with church, cloister, chapter house etc. However, in presenting new themes they seem to have to rely to some degree on those pre-formed understandings, for instance in the use of the word 'refectory', to help create new meanings. This paradox suggests that a sound understanding of the knowledge that audiences are likely to bring with them is important so that interpretations can maximise the opportunities for visitor participation.

### **3. Interpretation and Research**

A further challenge for interpreters may be identified in those areas where ongoing research comes to question the previously accepted discourses upon which interpretations have been based. Examples range from the re-evaluation of previous excavations (e.g. Campbell and

Maldonado 2020 on Iona) to ongoing fieldwork such as that at Lindisfarne (Jackson et al 2022). The 2022 Lindisfarne excavation recovered a fish vertebrae necklace (see also p. 204 below) which was initially identified as a set of prayer beads and dated between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries based on the context in which they were found. The beads, and this interpretation, were included in the 2023 interpretative scheme (Figure 6.1) (Brown 2023). Subsequent radiocarbon dating, however, placed the skeleton, around whose neck the beads had been hung, between 1033 and 1164 (Cole 2024) and so significantly changed this narrative. This acts as a reminder that physical interpretative schemes, which may be expected to have a life of a decade or more, can be rapidly overtaken by the materiality that emerges from excavation and the subsequent research which stems from it. When asked about this in the context of Lindisfarne shortly after the 2023 opening, both B09 and B16 reported the view that while it was judged that fundamental revision was unlikely to be needed, interpretative schemes could only be considered accurate to the point at which they were signed off. Understandably, the view had been taken that it was highly desirable that the exhibition should reflect the latest developments in the ongoing excavation adjacent to the priory, which was readily observable for visitors, but that it could only relate the understanding of a particular moment in time. If there was a need for further development of any interpretation this would have to be undertaken verbally by staff and volunteers who were able to be more responsive to changing need (B16 29:23). At Lindisfarne, these staff and volunteers would be provided with training and updated resource materials by the curatorial department when a need arose (B16 29:23).

It might be hypothesised that any changes made to interpretative schemes could have a negative impact on audience perceptions of their accuracy and dependability. A body of research suggests that for visitors one of the most valued aspects of museums, and by extension heritage sites, is the trustworthiness of the interpretative encounter (BritainThinks 2013; Dickenson 2024, 672-674). This is expressed as the expectation of an apolitical presentation of facts informed by a non-partisan objectivity (despite the museum sector sometimes doubting it is possible (BritainThinks, 2013, 20-21)). This expectation might be summed up as the dictum that museums must have a ‘moral rather than political standpoint’ (Dickenson 2024, 674). If it is the case that museums are ethical institutions, and there is no reason to think that they are not, this morality should create values which celebrate openness:

‘museum ethics is not a duty to conceal unethical behaviour within one’s own institution and/or a select group of colleagues’ (Marstine 2011, 6). Part of this openness must be an acceptance that the development of knowledge means that elements of interpretations will become redundant and that there must be a willingness to acknowledge this when it happens and, as the opportunity arises, to offer revisions. This openness has been described as ‘radical transparency’ (Marstine 2011; Lynch 2013), something that depends on effective open communication, a levelling of power relationships and the generation of ‘accountability in policies, processes and practices that diverse groups can trust and help shape’ (Marstine 2011, 17). In this way, far from diminishing trust, acknowledgement that the field has changed and that interpretations must change too, act to enhance institutional reputations.

It must be made clear that there was no suggestion that any of the case study sites were in any way acting unethically. Where extant interpretations had been overtaken by newer understandings, this was acknowledged by respondents and any continued presence of an error was due to the more general challenges inherent in updating interpretative schemes. Indeed, some sites clearly embraced changing perspectives and even sought them. At the Whithorn Visitor Centre visitors were encouraged to engage with ‘Cold Case Whithorn’ (The Whithorn Trust, 2025), a re-examination and re-appraisal of some of the material that has been recovered during the various excavations of the Abbey. This programme carries with it the possibility of significant changes in the narrative of the monastic site, not least because of the application of new techniques and methods of analysis and invites visitors to share in this process.

#### **d. The Place of the Church in Society**

##### **1. The Church and Social Stratification**

In narratives dominated by received hagiography, the status of individuals within Northumbrian society received little interpretative attention at the case study sites. Although Cuthbert, Hild, and Biscop were placed within an elite (panels at Durham, Whitby Abbey, Whitby Town Museum, and Jarrow Hall respectively), there was little suggestion that members of monastic communities might come from other groups in Anglian society. The story of Caedmon (EH IV 24) and his relatively lowly social status was related at Whitby Abbey, although in the context of a display reflecting on literary themes. Overall, there was little development of an understanding of religious communities as reflections of the society in which they sat and so little exploration of child oblation (except in relation to Bede at Jarrow Hall), enslavement (Rodrigues 2021, 73 -77), nor (Hild aside) the role of women and the opportunities that the monasteries created for them (Foot 2006, 140 -152, 180 -184). That monastic vocations could facilitate social mobility or occur later in life (Foot 2006, 146-148) was unremarked as was the importance of kindred bonds in establishing the social relationships which helped shape the conversion and the subsequent patronage of monastic foundations (Yorke 2006, 161-167).

Interpretative narratives that were concerned with individuals concentrated on acts of charity and piety, offering traditional accounts though largely uncritically and with limited contextualisation. Where membership of an elite was noted, it was balanced by a rejection of that status in favour of a spiritual representation:

His [Cuthbert's] life was marked by tension between his public roles, as bishop and religious advisor to the Northumbrian court, and a yearning to live a solitary existence. (Panel, Lindisfarne Priory)

For 17 years Aidan travelled between churches built on royal estates, ministering to the Northumbrians. It was said that he neither sought nor cared for worldly possessions and that he gave away gifts from kings or rich men to the poor who he met on his travels (Lindisfarne Priory guidebook (Story 2005, 23).

There is a loss of meaning through the lack of development of elite status in these narratives. This is particularly the case at Whitby where Hild's status, and that of her immediate abbatial



joint successors Ælfflæd and Eanflæd - the daughter and widow of king Oswiu - points to the elevation of the monastery not just as a royal mausoleum but also as a *de facto* extension of the royal court (Higham 1997, 251-252). The use of the monastery as the site of the 664 Synod suggests a pre-eminence amongst contemporary religious houses, something supported by the list of bishops the monastery produced (HE IV 23). By not placing Hild within the immediate royal circle she and her successors are not fully situated within 7<sup>th</sup> century Anglian society where it becomes clear that not only might women lead the most prestigious of joint monasteries, but they also had a role at the centre of Northumbrian polity. Nonetheless, Hild is celebrated at both sites in Whitby as a positive example of the role of women in early medieval Northumbria, a successful counterpoint to a predominantly male-centric narrative.

A second consideration is that by not developing secular backgrounds perhaps one of the most intriguing questions of the period is unexplored. Bede describes how Cuthbert arrived at the gates of the monastery at Melrose to ask for admission to the community on horseback accompanied by a servant and carrying a spear (*Life of Cuthbert* 6). These details likely enabled Bede's contemporary readers to accurately place Cuthbert in an Anglian hierarchy, putting him if not in the elite, then close to it. It would not seem unreasonable to imagine that modern audiences might want to ask why Cuthbert, and many of his aristocratic contemporaries, chose to seek the 'white martyrdom' (Stancliffe 1982) of monastic admission in this very new religion and in doing so whether that rank was renounced or retained. Such questions would seem to lend themselves to a narrative interpretative approach (Staiff 2014, 107-108) where visitors might be helped to consider their own worldviews, not least in terms of status and spirituality. However, none of the observed interpretative schemes developed the standing of individuals to this extent, instead concentrating on more hagiographical material where tropes of simplicity and humility were lauded.

Of prominent early Northumbrian Christians Wilfred was the most underrepresented at the case study sites being mentioned in only five interpretative contexts: once at Durham in the setting of buildings being constructed in stone rather than timber, twice at Whitby Town Museum as the spokesman for the Romanising faction at the 664 Synod and twice more at Jarrow Hall. Here he is described as Biscop's companion on his first journey to Rome and as

being ‘revolutionary’, along with Biscop, in the construction of stone monastic buildings. On one level, this is unsurprising as Wilfred is not necessarily readily associated with the sites that were investigated; however, this is despite his wide-ranging influence and notable role in the development of the Northumbrian Church. It may be a point of further reflection that two of these five references are in connection with the materiality of buildings, suggestive of the dominance of the aesthetic and material in interpretative approaches. Professionals felt that he was difficult to portray:

And that's because Wilfred is not approved of in some circles of those who treasure the northern saints. And the Northumbria Community [a modern, ecumenical, dispersed community claiming a Celtic spirituality] I didn't think is particularly keen on Wilfred. Which makes me wonder whether, you know, his narrative gets told with the same sense of importance as that of Aidan and Cuthbert and Bede. (B21 1:30:42)

I was trying to explain to my partner about Wilfred of Ripon where it'd be difficult to do a sympathetic reappraisal for his life because he was a bit of a bugger, really, you know? Some people, I think some people are made saints and some people are saints.... there's something about Cuthbert that he's not pazazz bang where Wilfred probably was. And I think, you know, if Wilfred was involved, well he was involved with Whitby, the Synod and such like, it's difficult to make him into a sympathetic figure. (B09 1:41:58)

Modern portrayals of Wilfred run the risk of presenting him as pantomime villain – a brash Romanist with a high doctrine of his own importance, everything that is contrary to the saintly bishops Aidan and Cuthbert. This somewhat overlooks his role in the formation of Christianity in Northumbria following the Synod of Whitby and his wider engagement with the Church both in England and more widely. The observations of B21 and B09 suggest that decisions over interpretative themes were informed by judgements of how the final scheme would be received by audiences. This may reflect the popularity of the idea of a Celtic Church (Bradley 2018) and invites consideration whether Christian figures are more palatable to modern visitors when portrayed as quiet pietists who are located in nature rather than technocrats who operated in the public square.

B21 suggested, however, that Wilfred needed to be viewed from a different perspective:

I mean, here in the land of St Wilfred, Hexham Abbey and everything, I've had to think again, about all that, actually, and I understand Wilfred much better than I used to, I think, because I now see how the tide of history, and history we're moving into, how Wilfred understood that in a way that all the other all his contemporaries are pretty well, all of them didn't quite see. That was his greatness, I think. (B21 13:12).

Although not amongst the case study sites used in this research, there is no meaningful reference in any observed interpretation at Ripon Cathedral that refers to Wilfred, despite the 7<sup>th</sup> century crypt of his monastery being open to visitors. The Cathedral guidebook does, however, offer a sympathetic one-page account of Wilfred's life whilst acknowledging that he was 'difficult and dogmatic' (Sayer 2022, 6). The small visitor centre at Hexham Abbey also offers a sympathetic presentation, albeit one that is largely constrained by space, though which contains no reference to a wider Northumbrian ecclesial context other than noting his presence at the Whitby Synod. While it seems axiomatic that interpretations will centre on that which is local rather than look for wider meanings, the lack of interpretative development of Wilfred and his life seems to be something of an omission.

A final interpretative caution was offered by A05 who observed that it was relatively easy to construct one-dimensional interpretations of individuals, not least when pursuing the role of an elite in the Church. Instead, there was a need to consider a more rounded perspective:

And I think that's sort of out of that school of history of it's not just about power and wealth and money. And so, the traditional interpretation of why Ebbe and Hild are abbesses where they are is because it's like a royal..., you know, they're running a monastery, and they can run it like a royal court. And there's a lot of wealth that goes through there. So, they're very comfortable there. Because, actually, it's a good way of royal princess or a royal queen, to go off and have a very good standard of life, which is I don't think is untrue. But I don't think it captures who those people were either. Because if that was if that was the only reason for Hild being there, she would never have called the Synod of Whitby she'd never done any of these things. Because it wouldn't matter. (A05 35:38).

## 2. The Church as an Agent of Social Control

A consistent issue of the presentation of religious belief, especially perhaps Christianity in the modern western idiom, is that any interpretative scheme must engage with ‘closed world systems’ (CWS) (Taylor 2007, 551). These may be characterised as being secular axioms, supposed truths that are freely expressed within popular discourse, but which can be demonstrated to be contentious and often self-referential. Examples might include claims for the absolute objectivity of science as against a religious subjectivity, the absence of any rationality in religious belief systems, and a belief that religion is the primary cause of war. Amongst such CWS is one which equates the Christian Church with power and control, dismissing wider social constructs with often over-simplistic claims of oppression, the gathering of wealth, and an unhealthy interest in the minutiae of people’s personal lives. This extends into some areas of the academy where early medieval Christianity is presented as being a reactionary force deployed in the restraint of individualism and social justice:

However, even if it is not clear exactly what a burial or standing stone stela might mean, we can be sure that it meant something, and it is through material culture that the local, the unorthodox, the marginalised, and the disempowered could find their voice. Our task is to interpret these signs of individual ideology, and our book is thus less concerned with the narrative of conversion than its processes. Many of our chapters lift the blanket of ‘Christianisation’ to reveal an exciting querulous world of independent thinking and dissent. (Carver 2003, 4).

The aim here is not to dismiss this ‘exciting querulous’ interpretation, although it is legitimate to observe the ease through which obfuscated materiality leads to the assertion of the presence of the marginalised and thence to the free thinking, membership of which may be considered a particularly modern virtue. Whilst it is true that contemporary heritage audiences may construct meaning using categories of marginalisation and disempowerment, not least in reflecting on a hierarchical and enslaving Northumbrian society, it is far less certain that these categories mirror 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century self-understanding, especially in terms of lived religious experience (McGuire 2008). The concepts of self-independence, dissent, and individualism, each coherent in modern western discourse, are of uncertain application to early medieval Northumbria where it might be argued cooperation, conformity and

interdependence would more likely be lauded because of the resilience these qualities offered in the face of existential threats such as disease, war and famine. Certainly, Northumbria embraced religious dispute, as the Whitby Synod demonstrates, but any evidence for societal dissent is far less clear. It is in this habitus that the Church takes its place, and any one-dimensional view of its role runs the risk of substantially distorting or diminishing a wider set of meanings. To see the Church and the conversion as purely imposed agents of social control, dismissing the mobility it brought, becomes a perverse interpretation. The ‘blanket of Christianisation’ (Carver 2003,4) rather than stifling and restraining may equally, it can be argued, have brought hope and comfort (Cramp 1999, 8).

Despite being demonstrable in academic discourse, the view that the Church acted in some way as an agent of suppression on behalf of elites was resisted at the case study sites and outcomes were more likely to be couched in terms of spiritual benefit. The only suggestions of some form of power relationship were seen at the National Museum of Scotland and the Whithorn Visitor Centre where various panels spoke of the 7<sup>th</sup> century geographical growth of Northumbria to include modern Galloway. The interpretation at Whithorn describes how Northumbrians had ‘overrun’ Galloway and a ‘colony’ of monks were installed at Whithorn, bringing with them ‘new contacts, wealth and power’. These statements should, however, be placed within a wider modern discourse concerned with contemporary Scottish identity where, as will be discussed in Chapter Seven, the Northumbrian presence in what is now modern Scotland is often portrayed as being alien, using language rich in colonial imagery.

### **3. Learning and Literacy**

Of the case study sites, the National Museum of Scotland offered the most distinctive interpretative approach to the role the Church played in the spread of literacy and learning:

We saw writing first when the Romans came. They needed its power to run their Empire and they wrote on everything. They wrote on tablets. they wrote on stones, they wrote their names on the things they owned. This impressed us, but we were happy to go on talking and telling as suited our ways. Later. the priests arrived and

they had writing too. They taught us about God from their sacred book. Some of our leaders learnt how to make their spellings, in the Latin of the priests, the ways of the Irish or the runes of the Vikings Some magic lives in writing. (Panel, Early Peoples Gallery, National Museum of Scotland).

The question of voice, in essence who ‘we’ are, was the subject of some contention when the museum opened (Ascherson 2000, 82-83). The response by David Clarke (2000), the then Head of Exhibitions, is a rare example of the discourses behind an interpretative scheme being openly revealed. Clarke describes the intention as being one cast in inclusion:

The texts which open each theme do indeed make ample use of ‘we’. Since our intention was that the displays should be as inclusive as possible, our ‘we’ deliberately embraced the extensive majority at any period that do not feel a sense of significance, status or power. (Clarke 2000, 221).

These panels were conceived during the implementation of Scottish Devolution and as such were deliberately designed to be resistant to partisan interpretations, where ‘contemporary archaeology finds the recognition of ethnic groups in material culture extremely difficult and often impossible’ (Clarke 2000, 200). In this the use of ‘we’ in the panel is indeterminate, despite a recognition of a need for narrators to be visible (Staiff 2014, 107-108), and the arriving priests could come from one of a spectrum of early medieval Christian traditions. What may also be noted is that literacy is equated with the expression of power, something supported by Clarke’s subsequent explanation. This is repeated elsewhere in the gallery:

Only in the 5th and 6th centuries did literacy return to Scotland., brought here by missionaries of the early Christian Church. These missionaries spoke Latin – the language of the Romans had become the language of the Church. They wore distinctive clothes, carried staffs and took their Latin books – chiefly the Bible, their ultimate source of authority – around with them in book satchels. But reading and writing was limited to a very few people. Some aristocrats learned to read and write. They used their literacy to impress on others just how important and powerful they were. Such powerful people sometimes had inscriptions carved on their memorials to show their privileged positions. (Panel, Early Peoples Gallery, National Museum of Scotland).

At Jarrow and Whitby, literacy was framed in the context of monastic learning where the monasteries were understood as cultural and scholastic centres. Interpretation at Jarrow Hall and the English Heritage managed site was located around Bede:

Bede entered the twin monastery aged seven, soon after it had been founded. Inspired by the new style of monastic life here, he dedicated his life to study, and his works are still used internationally today. (Panel, Jarrow, English Heritage)

Monasteries were the only places of learning. Bede spent much of his time studying, teaching, and writing. Some of his pupils became great men in their own right: Cuthbert went on to become Abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow; Egbert became Bishop of York and taught Alcuin, a renowned scholar who influenced European kings. (Panel, Jarrow Hall).

English Heritage's scheme at Whitby reflected similar themes, although these were placed in a European context:

Learning and culture were highly esteemed at the Anglo Saxon monastery which had an important school. Some of the monks and nuns were authors and others copied manuscripts. Their work was highly prized within mainland Europe. (Panel, Whitby Abbey)

Unique at Whitby Abbey was reference to Caedmon, described as the first named poet in the 'English language', within a scheme designed to highlight the site's role in the development of literacy and literature. Early medieval inscribed stone excavated from the abbey site was placed thematically with a suggested 8<sup>th</sup> century book cover decoration, a volume from the 17<sup>th</sup> century mansion built from the stone of the later abbey and a first edition of Stoker's *Dracula*. These artefacts suggested a continuity in the literary narrative of the site. Visitors appeared to linger over this display, perhaps because of an attraction to the first edition, which invited reflection on the relationship between reality and fiction in Whitby's history.

The Lindisfarne Gospels were mentioned twelve times in the Lindisfarne Priory interpretative scheme as against three in Durham and once at Jarrow Hall. Of these twelve instances, four

were in the context of the aesthetic appeal of the Gospels while the purpose of the book, suggested by its dedication ‘In honour of God and St Cuthbert and for all the saints whose relics are on this island’, was considered once. The associated Lindisfarne guidebook (Story 2005) devotes two pages (28-29) to the Gospels, including a full-page picture of the incipit page of the St John’s Gospel. While several aesthetic superlatives are used (e.g. ‘masterpiece’, ‘exquisite’, ‘expert’) the guide also refers to the dedication and considers connections with the output of Wearmouth-Jarrow together with the resources required to produce the book. Overall, the guidebook offers a rounded interpretation of the Gospels situating them both in early medieval and contemporary culture. However, while not elevating the aesthetic over other meanings, there is no development of the intent behind the Gospel book’s creation, nor any suggestions for its usage. From the perspective of religious motivations, this observation extends over most of the interpretations at the case study sites in that, while references to high standards of literacy, scholarship and artistic endeavour were frequently noted, the question why such considerable resources should be directed towards these outputs was not addressed.

## **e. Wider Connections**

### **1. Northumbrian in a European Context**

The connection of the Insular Church to the wider Church in Europe was acknowledged particularly at Whitby, Jarrow and Whithorn. The interpretative scheme at the Whithorn Visitor Centre emphasised Mediterranean connections not least through the large quantities of high-status 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century glass and ceramics which were excavated on the site (Hill 1997), the presence of which has been used to infer pre-Northumbrian secular rather than monastic occupation (Forsyth and Maldonado 2013). The scheme, which maintains the presence of the British monastery at Whithorn rather than Kirkmadrine, suggests a period of decline prior to a 7<sup>th</sup> century absorption into Northumbria after which there was ‘little evidence for large scale trade’ (Panel, Whithorn Visitor Centre). That this move may have opened the wider cultural connections which are a feature of the Northumbrian Church is not, however, observed.



Interpretation at Whitby was somewhat more straightforward. Bede describes how numbers of people from Britain would enter the monasteries of the ‘Franks and the Gauls’ (EH III 8) and records how Aidan dissuaded Hild from joining her sister at Chelles to found a monastic house on the banks of the Wear (EH IV 23). Although this is unreported at either of the Whitby Museums, Hild is placed at the centre of a European network where ‘Educated, wealthy and influential Christian people lived at Whitby and visited from Europe to consult Hild’ (Panel, Whitby Abbey, English Heritage). The basis for this claim is uncertain, although perhaps it rests on Bede’s description of Hild offering counsel to kings and princes (EH IV 23). Surer connections are found in the English Heritage guidebook where the extant letter from Ælfflæd, Hild’s successor, to the Abbess of Pfazel in the Rhineland is noted (Brindle 2020, 9).

Whitby’s continental connections are further demonstrated through the worked stone belonging to the Whitby Plain Cross group (Figure 5.3). Lang (2002) suggests that Chelles provided the inspiration for this group, and they may be indicators of a Derian alignment with Gaulish Christianity while Bernicia looked north to Iona (Cramp 1993, 61; 1999, 5). These continental influences are noted in the interpretative scheme at Whitby Abbey, although this is relatively low key:

With a style unique to Whitby, these stone crosses combine Continental and Irish influences. Their fairly plain design is in keeping with the ideals of a monastic community, as described by the famous Benedictine monk Bede in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. (Panel, Whitby Abbey, English Heritage).

This interpretation suggests a hybrid Chelles/ Irish style which is not readily found in the wider literature, although Chelles was subject to Columbanian influence (Stancliffe 2017, 22-23). The plain design being ‘in keeping’ with Bede’s monastic ideals appears conjectural, as is his description as a Benedictine, and may, perhaps, be an extrapolation of a more modern trope which burdens all monasticism with a Cistercian-like rejection of decoration. As James Campbell notes: ‘in all descriptions of Northumbrian churches by others than Bede, stress is

laid on gold and silver, jewels and silk' (1989; 5). This advocacy of simplicity at Whitby sits awkwardly with the decorated artefacts from the early monastery which are on display and, furthermore, the following line of the panel which describes how standing crosses were ornamented (also Lang 2002).



Figure 5.3 Plain Cross in the Chelles Style, Whitby Abbey. Style. Ian Colson.

The interpretative scheme at Jarrow Hall firmly placed Northumbria within a continental network. Although initial interpretive panels were suggestive of a lack of definitive connections in the sub-Roman period, the 597 Augustinian mission was clearly explained as was the process whereby Edwin returned to Northumbria with his queen, Athelburh, and the missionary Paulinus. Oswald is portrayed as looking to Iona, but Oswiu's decision at Whitby in 664 is described as firmly anchoring Northumbria in a Roman orbit:

The King decreed that Roman practices should be adopted. Thus Northumbria became linked with Rome and open to artistic and cultural influences from across Christian Europe. (Panel, Jarrow Hall).

The implication of this passage is that there were few, if any links, before 664 which is somewhat contradicted by an adjacent panel that describes Biscop and Wilfred's journey to Rome c. 653. There is, however, no reference to Gaulish or other influences. As has been previously noted, this is suggestive of an interpretative praxis which tends to present binaries rather than developing more complicated patterns of co-existence and gradual change. Biscop's six journeys to Rome are described in some detail, using Bede as the primary source, as are those of his successor, Ceolfrith. Overall, the interpretation reads almost as a record of a series of monastic shopping expeditions as the books, relics, masons, silks, and icons that Biscop returned with are listed (HAB 1-6 & 9). No reflection is offered as to why these things might have been important, other than that they allowed the adoption of a Roman style, nor why they could not be sourced in Northumbria. In a similar way, the production of Ceolfrith's three great codices (EH 15) is described with a clear distinction made between the Roman decoration which can be seen in the *Codex Amiatinus* (and the replica on display at Jarrow Hall) and the Lindisfarne Gospel's Insular ornamentation. The visitor is left, however, to create their own explanation as to why this should be and why the *Codex Amiatinus* was preferable as a gift to the pope in its 'late Classical' (Panel, Jarrow Hall) style. This may be a reflection on a public appreciation of the Lindisfarne Gospels which are popularly lauded as the superlative example of early medieval art (e.g. Sadgrove 2013, 98-99) while the *Codex* remains largely unknown.

Overall, the Jarrow Hall interpretation offers the visitor a far deeper insight into *romanitas* than either Whitby or Whithorn. It does, however, have significant advantages – it has a far larger display space and is primarily concerned with Biscop's Jarrow monastery rather than trying to give equal emphases in a multi-phase site. Nonetheless, the interpretive scheme does not explore the implications it raises and while, regarding Biscop's perambulations, it can claim 'What he saw profoundly influenced him and he brought revolutionary ideas back to England' (Panel, Jarrow Hall) it does not attempt to explain the novelty of these Roman ideas, if indeed they were revolutionary, nor why they were so attractive. Instead, Biscop's pilgrimages to Rome are presented as arduous journeys and to a certain extent unique. Whilst such journeys were not normative, they were not exceptional and so the full depth of Northumbrian contacts with Europe is largely lost, leaving an impression of English insularity.

## 2. The Synod of Whitby

Overwhelmingly, interpretations portrayed the Whitby Synod as being a confrontation between Roman and Irish (or Celtic) Churches, primarily brought about by the royal court needing to settle pragmatically on a date for Easter. Unsurprisingly, the most detailed explanations of the Synod were found at Whitby. The outcome was described in a variety of ways across the different case study sites. This ranged from being a pivotal moment which ‘aligned the English Church with Rome’ (panel, Whitby Abbey) to one suggestive of aggressive Roman colonisation where ‘the Celtic rite [was] eventually suppressed at the Synod of Whitby’ (panel, Whithorn Visitor Centre) as the Church acquiesced to Rome’s ‘centralising power’ (Whitby guidebook - Brindle 2020, 27). Such emotive language is again suggestive of discourses where an ennobled Celtic Church has been usurped by an alien, hierarchical, Catholicism, a frequent theme in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Celtic movement (Bradley 1999, 190-232) and, perhaps, symptomatic of a deeper, older, anti-Catholicism.

In presenting the Synod as confrontational, the interpretative inference is that the vanquished Irish tradition simply disappeared. No suggestion was observed of how change may have taken place and so the wealth of scholarship which has suggested various patterns of transformation and co-existence (e.g. Stancliffe 2017) was unacknowledged. This may be an example of the privileging of interpretive binaries, perhaps necessitated by a desire to replace the descriptive difficulties of an elusive Irish monastic pattern with a more linear Benedictine model. There was no suggestion, for instance, that the journeys of Biscop and Ceolfrith to Rome could be understood through the Irish lens of peregrination (Stancliffe 2017, 42).

At the case study sites the Synod is portrayed as having profound national if not international importance with no indication that it may be seen through other lenses such as the developing expression of Anglian kingship (Higham 1997, 255-257; Higham and Ryan 2013, 158) or that it may have been a localised decision in the context of wider debates about the dating of Easter (Wakefield 2008, 125-126). No reference was observed to any of the other councils of

the period, not least the 672/3 Council of Hertford which might be judged to be of greater significance (Cubbitt 1993, 194) in that, aside from defining episcopal polity, it also confirmed the alignment of all the English church to the Roman method for calculating Easter (EH IV 5).

#### **f. Postscript – the end of the ‘Golden Age’.**

The Viking raid on Lindisfarne marks in the mind of many the beginning of the end of Northumbria’s ‘Golden Age’. Unsurprisingly, the 793 attack features as a major component of the interpretation on Lindisfarne itself. One wall of the Lindisfarne Priory visitor centre carries a large map showing Viking incursions while a central case displays the so-called Viking Raider Stone (Figures 5.3 and 5.4). Prominent too is a spearhead (Figure 5.6) which is described as 9<sup>th</sup> century and is speculatively placed within a narrative of resistance to Viking incursion. The spearhead sits alone in an illuminated case perhaps two or three metres from the Raider Stone, which is itself sits in its own case, with the wall map behind. The two-sided stone is placed so that the visitor approaches the face where the sun and the moon lie above the arms of a cross. Two figures bow, or kneel, in prayer below while two hands point to, or possibly support, the cross arms. The other side shows seven figures with axes and swords raised above their heads, an image which in the popular imagination has often been seen as a representation of the 793 raid (Hadley 2006, 197). A more nuanced interpretation, and that which is offered in the accompanying label, is that the stone is a 9<sup>th</sup> century grave marker and that the images are drawn from the imagery of the Book of Revelation and depict apocalyptic scenes (Cramp 1984, 206-207; Story 2005, 31). This does not, though, necessarily negate some association with the events of 793, or indeed subsequent raids.

The interpretative decision around what name to give the stone demonstrates some of the difficulties in trying to advance new, or different, understandings in the face of embedded traditional meanings. The Raider Stone has been variously described as the Lindisfarne Stone (Roesdhal et al 1981, 14), the Viking Domesday Stone (Storey 2005, 31) or a name has been avoided altogether and it has been described simply as a gravemarker (Hawkes 1996, 109).

The English Heritage website promoting the highlights of the Lindisfarne collection (English Heritage undated) refers initially to it as the Viking Raider Stone and subsequently as the Domesday Stone while the object label somewhat hedges its bets calling it the Viking Raider-Judgement Stone. The introduction of ‘judgement’ into the stone’s title may be an alignment with the development of this as a theme in the latest interpretative scheme (B16 43:59 and see below). Of course, there can be no absolute certainty that the depiction is of the Day of Judgement and so, through a deliberate inclusion, a particular narrative is being authorised alongside a more traditional meaning. It would be of some interest to observe over time whether ‘Judgement Stone’ becomes more widely associated with the Raider Stone, and so better understand the influence of the Lindisfarne scheme.



Figure 5.4. Viking Raider Stone (1), Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre. This face is presented towards the flow of movement in the exhibition space. Ian Colson.



Figure 5.5. Viking Raider Stone (2), Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre. Ian Colson.

The placing of the Raider Stone, together with the wall map and the spearhead, had been the subject of considerable discussion. This conversation was led by exigencies of the preservation of the spearhead (B16 39:38) but equally prominent was the question of which way the Raider Stone should face. The image of the seven warriors (Figure 5.5) is so commonplace that it likely makes the stone one of the most recognisable artefacts of the period and thus the best-known artefact in the Lindisfarne exhibition. Ultimately, the decision was made that the warriors should face away from the direction visitors entered the space with the obverse face with its representation of the presumed Day of Judgement (Cramp 1984, 206-207; Story 2005, 31) seen first. The reason for this was so that the stone would support rather than detract from the interpretative narrative:

If you pick up any book on Anglo Saxons or Vikings, you will find an image of the Viking Raider stone in them, you will typically find it illustrating the Vikings, so you'll always see the seven Raiders illustrated. You'll rarely see the judgement day side illustrated and interpretation of it. The interpretation of it, you're right, has



changed over the years and it's become more subtle. For me, having done that research and finding the core importance of the Day of Judgement, the link to the name stones, the story that then weaves through. To me it was really important to have almost the wrong side, in terms of popular view facing out, which is why I've put it at the judgement day facing the visitor as they come in. Because I felt it really flowed with the story. And then you come around the other side and go, 'Oh, I recognise that object'. And that then links well with the, the European map of Viking raids on the wall, but you've also just passed, that's that spearhead as well. So, it starts the kind of 'Oh, right'. And it's a real change again. (B16 43:59)

The effect of the incursion is not presented in the visitor centre as the end of monastic life on Lindisfarne and the monastery is described as active up to 875 on the panel recounting the Viking raid. The English Heritage guidebook describes a retreat to Norham in the 830s followed by a return to Lindisfarne, after which the traditional peregrinatory narrative is repeated (Story 2005, 30-31). The Christian life of the island is reported to have continued into the 10<sup>th</sup> century, supported by the dating of pillow stones (2005, 31). The shock of the initial raid is reflected both in the guidebook (2005, 31) and the *in-situ* panels where Alcuin's 793 letter to King Æthelred (d. 796) is quoted. A unique element at Lindisfarne is the invitation to audiences to share in an overtly theological reflection as to why this could have happened:

On 8 June 793 Vikings raided Lindisfarne in their first major attack in western Europe. The raid was devastating for the island community and throughout the Christian world. Pagans had raided one of England's holiest shrines, and God and St Cuthbert had not stopped them. (Panel, Lindisfarne Priory, English Heritage)

Elsewhere, the Viking incursions are credited with bringing monastic life to an end. At Whitby Abbey, paralleled at the Town Museum, it is suggested that the capture of York in 867 acted as the catalyst for the collapse of the monastery. No explanation for the demise of Jarrow was observed at Jarrow Hall, although the earlier Bede's World guidebook notes the destruction of the site by fire (reflecting the initial excavation report: Cramp 1969, 48) and associates this with Viking raids (Bede's World 2004, 9). The information leaflet available at St Paul's church (undated) notes the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's date of 794 (Swanton 2000, 57) for the first raid on Jarrow while the English Heritage panels on the monastery site



describe general 8th and 9th century decline. At Whithorn, the destruction of the Northumbrian monastery by fire (Hills, 1997) is noted although placed in a nuanced narrative which describes a gradual wanning of Northumbrian influence leading to speculation of destruction because of civil war or Viking or Scottish raiders.



Figure 5.6. 9<sup>th</sup> Century Spearhead. Panel reads: *Spearhead, 9<sup>th</sup> Century. This iron spearhead was found in the remains of the farmstead buildings at Green Shiel. It has a split socket for attaching it to a wooden shaft. It may have been used by people living there for defence against Viking raiders.* Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre. Ian Colson.

A challenge for interpreters in portraying this new, Viking centric, period is in the conflict between received historical tradition and the dynamic evidence of the archaeological record.

As Foot (2006, 25-26) describes, the presentation of monasticism has traditionally been one of 7<sup>th</sup> century origins followed by an 8<sup>th</sup> century golden age, which implodes under Viking pressure leading to practical extinction in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. A growing body of material evidence suggests, however, the continuation of some form of monastic life and that claims of extinction are exaggerated and over reliant on the accuracy of 11<sup>th</sup> century writings (Hadley 2006, 193-206). There is no doubt that Viking raids brought about a reverse in monastic fortunes, but it would be wrong to claim that this was the single cause of monastic collapse. Deterioration of the quality of monastic life exercised not just Bede but also churchmen such as Boniface and Alcuin (Blair 2005, 108-109; Foot 2006, 17; Yorke 2006, 184-187). Wider societal morality also came under scrutiny, so much so that Alcuin could famously claim that the raid on Lindisfarne was divine retribution for the falling away of the English from their Christian calling. The 672 Council of Hertford, and those held subsequently at Clofesho, acted not just to define ecclesial polity but also to condemn unacceptable behaviour on the part of clerics and religious (Cubitt 1995). The necessity for the codification of clerical conduct is an indicator of changes within the Church and suggestive of a growing accommodation with other norms within English society.

Interpreters are thus left balancing a dominant popular narrative of apocalyptic Viking destruction with material evidence which points to something altogether more gradual. While there is some scope in guidebooks to address such issues, the panels and labels of an exhibition are difficult mediums by which to convey complex meaning. There is also the possibility that visitors may have a greater affinity with the Viking than the Anglian through the persistence of the trope of axe wielding and horn-helmeted super warriors and the popularity of an ever-increasing range of television and film portrayals. Research into the audience use of entertainment media as a lens through which to construct meanings around medieval religion is in its infancy (van Dijk 2023) but it was clear that professionals could sense how accessible Viking themes had become for audiences:

There was another object that I found out too late (to exhibit), that would have been amazing. And that's the bear claw that was discovered last year, I think, or was it 2021? And the theory being that the person, possibly, that came off a bear shirt from a berserker, which is a fantastic story. (B16 39.38)

## **g. Chapter Conclusions**

This chapter observes a privileging of several themes in textual onsite interpretations. Here, traditional and hagiographic accounts appear to be used in preference to any revisionist understandings and paradigm shifts are presented in favour of gradual processes. Binaries appear to be much more readily portrayed, as is evidenced by the observed emphasis on difference and confrontation.

Notably, the spiritual is privileged over other meanings, albeit without any precise definition of what this means. Where political rather than religious motives might be suspected in the development of the Church the former is rarely developed and in this way Gilchrist's observation of the dominance of the secular in academic interpretation (2020, 9) does not appear to translate to these heritage settings. It has been inferred here that part of the reason for this is that interpretations are to some degree shaped around audience apprehensions and the preexisting knowledge that visitors bring. This can make it difficult for professionals to offer newer narratives, even though the development of interpretations in the light of emerging understandings adds, rather than detracts, from the trust which is placed in them.

Early medievalists may regret the lack of development of a variety of themes in the observed schemes. It has been argued here that this leads to some loss of meaning and that opportunities for narrative based interpretations have been bypassed in favour of arguably less effective didactic schemes. In observing this the attendant caveat is, however, that these interpretative schemes are necessarily constrained by cost and space. Professional strategies to mitigate these limitations seem to be the acceptance of some degree of Benedictine normativity, a homogenization of the period and the general acquiescence to tropes emerging from a popular conception of Celtic spirituality. How reliable these latter themes are will be investigated in the next chapter which moves on to consider the representation of lived religious experience.

## **CHAPTER SIX: NORTHUMBRIAN BELIEF**

### **a. Introduction**

Emerging from the sociological study of religion, the lived religion approach (McGuire 2008) centres on the empirical observation of religious and spiritual practice. Broadly aligning with the materialist approach, it resists the Euro-Americentric tendency for western concepts of orthodoxy and orthopraxy to delegitimise discordant meanings through the recognition that doctrine and practice (together with religious materialities) are not fixed but continue to develop over time. It is thus particularly concerned with contested meanings, not least those around miracles, magic, and power (McGuire 2008, 33-37) and in the legitimisation of the actions and interior life of individuals. This is especially useful in the characterisation of early medieval belief where the apotropaic use of charms and relics, instead of being held as an example of some form of primitive folk religion or the enduring resistance of pre-conversion beliefs, can be situated within an evolving Christianised society where divine power was exercised through the agency of the material. In a similar way, and again by way of example, the discovery of grave goods in Christian burials does not necessarily require a delegitimization of their religious authenticity because of later imposed essentialisms, rather they point to a spectrum of negotiated beliefs and practices.

Whilst lived religion may seem a useful vehicle for understanding early medieval faith, the roots of its sociological methodology are concerned with gathering of data from the living rather than the dead. This is subverted, however, by the proponents of the 'lived ancient religion' approach who suggest that the study of the beliefs of the past is advantaged by the ability to observe progressive change. This dismisses a monolithic, immutable view of organised religion and allows civic and individual beliefs and practices to be balanced against each other:

Rather, the focus on the ancient world, the past, the already lived experiences and events, provides the opportunity to study lived religion with a renewed and revitalized

focus. This approach overcomes the dichotomy of official and institutionalized religion on the one hand and “lived religion” on the other. Rather, taking the perspective on individual appropriations to its extremes, it also allows studying institutions as sedimented forms of lived religion. Thus, as “lived *ancient* religion” a framework to analyze religious change is given, religion in the making even on a large scale (Gasparini et al 2020, 1).

Gasparini et al (2020) ground their work on ancient Roman religion in a methodology using ‘four key notions’ (2020, 1) themselves derived from the work of Rüpke and Raja (2015). These notions (appropriation, religious agency, situational meaning and communication) highlight the connections between social structures and the agency of individuals thus allowing a nuanced understanding of engagement in a civic religion, giving it shape if not necessarily defined form. As a developed methodology this would seem to have some applicability in early medieval studies too, albeit the material and written record for the Roman period, in which the lived ancient approach has predominately been applied, outstrips that for early Northumbria. Insular early medievalists appear to have had limited engagement with either of these lived religious experience approaches, although they have been employed in the study of pre-Christian Scandinavian religion (e.g. Wikström af Edholm et al 2019).

In museums and at heritage sites it might be expected that living interpretation would be a particularly apposite mechanism to introduce lived experience. Buggeln (2017, 192-193) describes the influence of live interpretation in the context of contemporary American practice, not least in the interpretative scheme at the Colonial Williamsburg site in Virginia, where living interpreters immerse themselves in a period and endeavour to interact with visitors entirely in character (Herrick 2023). This living interpretation adopts some lived religion principles, including being a mechanism through which contested heritage (at Williamsburg in the context of antisemitic comments in an interpreter-delivered sermon) reportedly has an electrifying effect on audiences (Buggeln 2017, 193). This may well fit into Tilden’s requirement that interpretation should ‘provoke’ (2007, 59-67); however, as has been noted previously, no live interpretation was observed at any of the case study sites and it remains uncertain whether this is because of practical or more philosophical reasons.

Having briefly outlined some of the characteristics of the lived religions approach, the remainder of this chapter will use both it and the principles of the religious material turn (Morgan 2022) to investigate how interpreters have chosen to present Northumbrian Christianity to audiences. The first section will consider the interpretative use of hagiography, particularly the reporting of the miraculous, the use of relics and the prevalence of magic. Secondly, the practice of belief will be discussed with reference to the materiality of prayer and memorialisation. The final section will review the interpretation of worked and decorated stone.

## **b. Holy People and Relics**

### **1. Everyday Miracles**

The first words of the opening chapter of the definitive *St Cuthbert, his cult and his community to A.D 1200* (Bonner, Stancliffe and Rollason 1987) relate a story about Cuthbert:

21 May, 685, was a memorable day in Cuthbert's life. He spent it with Queen Iurminburh, her husband, Ecfrið, king of the Northumbrians, being at that time on campaign against the Picts. Their party was being shown round the sights of Carlisle by its *prefectus* when, suddenly, the saint stood still. First he leaned on staff and looked at the ground. Then he lifted his eyes heavenward, sighed; and spoke. 'Oh! Oh! Oh! I think that the war is over and judgement has been given against our people in battle.' (Campbell 1987, 3).

In this way, Campbell records the incident described in the *Anonymous Life of Cuthbert* (IV 8) where Cuthbert is reported to have received a premonition of Ecfrið's defeat at Nechtansmere. Campbell considers the event to be significant because 685 marked the end of Northumbrian expansionism and the beginning of a period of stasis before one of decline. What is notable in this description, which is no doubt a rhetorical mechanism, is that there are no caveats. It was not reported that this happened, nor was it relayed through the anonymous author, it simply *was* the case that it *was* a memorable day. In many respects this encapsulates the distinctive interpretative challenge when a source is hagiographic. It is

relatively straight forward to suggest that the historical record places Cuthbert in Carlisle on 21 May 685 but to assert that a supernatural revelation took place creates a different order of meaning. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that Campbell expected his academic audience to be sufficiently dexterous to identify and interpret the different epistemologies the passage employs, yet the casual reader is not offered any tools through which to create an informed meaning. Interpreters are placed in a similar position. A decision must be made on how to present themes that emerge from texts which mix the historical, material and hagiographic for audiences from widely differing backgrounds and with infinite expectations. Although such a choice is not unique to the presentation of the early medieval, it is a particular consideration in the interpretation of a Northumbrian church populated by miracle working saints.

Although necessarily decontextualised and thus of limited value, a count of the use of names on interpretative panels at the case study sites is indicative of the use of individuals in interpretations. ‘Cuthbert’ was, for instance, used on 63 occasions in the Durham Open Treasure exhibition, followed by 32 at Lindisfarne Priory, 2 at Jarrow Hall and once at Whitby Town Museum. Meanwhile, Hild or Hilda appeared 37 (18 times at Whitby Abbey, 19 at Whitby Town Museum). As the Whitby Town Museum has significantly fewer interpretative panels than the Abbey, it is suggestive of a greater emphasis on Hild in the interpretation that it offers. Bede was the most mentioned individual with 125 references across sites and was absent only from the National Museum of Scotland, the Whithorn Priory Museum and on the case labels at Kirkmadrine. This suggests something of the interpretive reliance placed upon him.

Despite being a flawed comparison (larger sites are more able to offer wider interpretative scope and hence likely to name individuals more often), this data is supportive of a truism that heritage sites are more likely to develop personalities with a local connection in their interpretative schemes. Thus, Cuthbert receives greater attention at Durham and Lindisfarne, Hild at Whitby and so on. It is also suggestive of the widespread, perhaps uncritical, use of Bede as a documentary source. Although the volume and influence of Bede’s written output far exceeds that of many of his contemporaries, it is nonetheless of interest that amongst those who are frequently cited in reference to the period, at least in introductory texts, Gildas

was mentioned only twice (both at Whitby Town Museum) and Alcuin once, perhaps predictably at Lindisfarne in the context of his reflection on the 793 raid.

In the Durham Cathedral Open Treasure exhibition, a prominent representation of Cuthbert is surrounded by a timeline describing the key moments of his life. It is notable that this does not shy away from the miraculous, a feature accentuated by using the present perfect tense:

651 One night, looking after sheep in the hills, Cuthbert sees a vision of angels guiding a shining soul to heaven. The next day, he learns that this happened at the exact moment that Aidan, Bishop of Lindisfarne, died. Cuthbert realises that this is a sign from God, and decides to join a monastery.

660 – 664 Cuthbert returns to Melrose. Boisil dies of plague, and Cuthbert becomes the new Prior of Melrose. He travels around Northumbria preaching and becomes known for miracles of healing. He has a very close relationship with nature, and his brother monks are amazed to see animals and birds tend to his needs, bringing him food when he is hungry or drying his feet with their fur.

After Cuthbert's death, the timeline goes on to describe how 'Pilgrims begin visiting and report miracles of healing, a sure sign of Cuthbert's holiness'. This reaches an apogee with the description of the translation of Cuthbert's incorruptible remains which are a 'sign of great sainthood' (Panel, Durham Open Treasure).

Overall, the tone at Lindisfarne is subtly different. Although it is noted that 'Cuthbert saw a vision of Aidan's death and regarded it as his calling to become a monk' on an introductory panel in the Visitor Centre, there is no wider reference to Cuthbert performing miracles himself, nor any recounting of a miraculous engagement with the natural world. Indeed, the only miraculous actions suggested are the implication of sanctity associated with incorruptibility and the later miracles subsequently associated with his tomb.



This difference might be understood in several ways. Whilst acknowledging that two sets of panels provide slender evidence, it may be that the Cathedral interpreters were more confident in introducing a supernatural element as against a more secular stance within English Heritage. This view may be supported at Whitby Abbey where another English Heritage interpretation touched on the miraculous. It was reported that:

In about 680, a herdsman called Caedmon lived here at Whitby taking care of the monastery's animals. Overnight, in a dream, Caedmon discovered a miraculous gift of song and poetry. News of his talents reached Abbess Hild who advised Caedmon to become a monk at her monastery. Caedmon composed verse based on biblical stories and is the first named poet in the English language. (Panel, Whitby Abbey).

This somewhat downplays the source of this account where Bede (EH IV 24) frames the incident entirely theologically. The new musical ability is not described primarily as a gift rather a far more definitive, and theologically articulate, grace. The resultant poetry and song is not offered for secular use but for the glorification of God and 'in all of which he sought to turn his hearers away from delight in sin and arouse in them the love and practice of good works' (EH IV 24). Bede locates all this in Caedmon's Christian life, epitomised by the description of his death, that of the perfect monk, who after receiving the Eucharist ensures that he is reconciled with all his brethren, lies down and makes the sign of the cross, dying to the sound of the singing of night prayer (EH IV 24). The decision to interpretatively frame the story of Caedmon in terms of musical gifts and to locate this within the canon of English poetry invites reflection. It may suggest the avoidance of religious themes, although equally it may speak to some of the constraints of interpretative panels where a limited number of narratives can be developed. The interpretation in question is offered in the display which considers the place of literature in the history of Whitby Abbey and includes a first edition copy of Stoker's *Dracula*. The panel is thus symptomatic of the needs of a multi-phase site where a thematic interpretation attempts to engage a heterogenous audience.

Overall, there was insufficient evidence to determine different approaches to hagiographical detail although a suggestion that faith-embedded interpretation was more likely to embrace the miraculous does not appear unreasonable. This may go some way to explain the reporting

of Cuthbert's miracles at Durham where the interpretative scheme was consistently understood by those interviewed to emerge from the mission of the Cathedral. This does not necessarily suggest a lack of criticality, rather that the conceptual tools exist in faith settings to legitimise a specific set of meanings. Equally, however, it may be that the nature of the Cathedral as an institution which acts as a locus of unity for a faith community beyond its immediate congregation requires it to shy away from the exploration of meanings which may be seen in some quarters to undermine wider traditional narratives. Criticality was, however, reported at English Heritage, not least regarding the tradition concerning Cuthbert and the environment:

I was quite keen that stuff got across, you know, the idea that some of the old assumptions were debunked. Of course, it's difficult, because you've only got so many words but there was, one thing that did slip in [to the proposed interpretative scheme] was the old chestnut of the animism. And the idea that, you know, it's all about Cuthbert was the first ecologist and there was a bird protection scheme, which is just a nonsense. (B09 54:49)

Ultimately, however, an element largely missing in either of the presentations of Cuthbert at Durham or Lindisfarne was an attempt to portray neither his lived experience nor those who subsequently asked for his intercession around his shrine. A suggestion as to why this might be is offered at the cathedral where it is noted in the Cuthbert timeline that:

676

Cuthbert decides to become a hermit, someone who lives alone to be closer to God. He moves to a remote island near Lindisfarne called Inner Farne. (Panel, Durham Open Treasure)

The necessity to define a hermit is suggestive of the cathedral's experience of the knowledge and understanding that visitors might bring. It does not seem unreasonable to think that some audiences may have thought that solitude was the primary purpose of a monastery in the first place or that they might wonder why separateness was necessary to move closer to God, but these remain unexplored. Although there is a considerable volume of scholarship which has developed descriptions and typologies of Christian spiritual experience over the last two

millennia (e.g. introductory works by Waller and Ward 1999; McGrath 2013; Springer and Clarke 2022) there appears to be little confidence in its applicability in the interpretative context not least, perhaps, because of the challenge interpreters have in developing complex concepts within the limitations of space and word counts. This difficulty may be compounded when there is a need to move beyond the interpretation of the material and into the abstract. At Durham the visitor must be content that Cuthbert's actions were to bring him 'closer' to God although what the audience, whose understanding of ascetism is suggested by this label as being occluded, may understand by this is uncertain.

As for those Northumbrians who gathered around the shrines of the minsters, or who saw or held or wore the relics of holy men and women, none of the interpretations at the case study sites made anything other than passing reference. No attempt was seen to describe the relationship between the saint and the believer nor the sense that the holy dead were very much part of the lives of the living which, for instance, permeates Bede's writings (e.g. EH III 9-13). This may be because none of the sites had artefacts which spoke directly into this discourse although it may also be that such beliefs are difficult to convey to modern audiences. It may also be that such beliefs are unintelligible to interpreters who themselves may be nervous in the representation of religious themes. In terms of this study, this absence is something of a loss as it would help clarify whether a privileged interpretative discourse existed where a clerical culture was shown as imposing saintly cults as part of an economic schema (Gilchrist 2020, 4, 5-6). In a world where kinship bonds were both horizontal and vertical, bridging the gaps between clerical and lay as well as among nobles and those who owed them service (Blair 2005, 159), the likelihood is that the relationship between the intercessor and the saint was multifaceted and complex.

## **2. Magic and Relics**

A particular advantage of the material turn in religious studies is the legitimization of the study of the place of magic and relics in early medieval lives. The opening of a material agenda allows an investigation into the meaning of the agency of objects which subverts the

broad typologies of primitivism or superstition derived, in much European and American writing at least, from the influence of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant hegemony. The definition of early medieval magic is, however, fraught with difficulty and academically contentious (Lawrence-Mathers 2007, 88) in comparison to the later middle ages, where, for instance, Gilchrist (2020, 111) offers a definition employing the Thomistic concepts of above, beyond, and against nature. In this scheme, magic that was empowered by the hidden, or occult, power of nature (the above and beyond) was licit because it employed the pervasive power of the Divine. That which was invoked against the natural order was demonic and therefore anathema. Earlier theologies, however, lacked such systematic theological definition, although the core doctrines were largely shared.

An important consideration is the question of the degree of perseverance of pre-Christian practices into the post-conversion period. Various penitentials reference proscribed magical rituals and whilst there were some prohibitions, such as the eating of horse meat which may be related to pre-conversion sacrificial rites (Blair 2005, 167-169; Yorke 2006; 221), magic which was held to be compatible with Christian belief appears to have been tolerated if not encouraged (Flint 1991). Yorke (2006; 99-100) observes that this approach falls in line with Pope Gregory's direction to the Augustinian mission to evangelise through the Christianisation of pre-existing societal structures and practices, though she goes on to reinforce that the most fundamental understanding of magic, the control or influence of natural forces, was a belief held by everybody, lay and clergy alike (2006, 256). Ultimately, it is difficult to distinguish between what is religious and that which is social and secular (if, indeed, such a distinction is legitimate) and as Blair notes the labelling of some activities as pagan is 'a boundary drawn by critics, not by practitioners' (2005, 169).

In her analysis of *Archbishop Theodore's Penitential*, Anne Lawrence-Mathers (2007) observes that prohibitions on unacceptable magical practices appear primarily directed towards women, not least in transgressions around issues of health and fertility. Men, however, were held to be more culpable and, when referenced, to be more likely to be concerned with the diabolical (2007, 96-97). In the taxonomy of penances, she goes on to suggest that the sins or offences which the *Penitentiary* seeks to absolve are primarily idolatrous rather than magical (2007, 96-98) and that these two categories can be joined by a

third in elements of the medicinal which denied divine action (2007, 100). She concludes that the category of *malefici*, the precursor of the witch of later centuries, was not a feature of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century society (2007, 100) rather a 10<sup>th</sup> century introduction through continental penitentials. This may help in the interpretation of the excavated inhumations of so-called ‘wise women’ with their attendant artefacts (Flint 1991; Blair 2005, 153).

The excavation of post-conversion graves continues to produce a variety of objects which were deposited during burial (Geake 1997; Blair 2005, 170-174, discussed in more detail below). Although a variety of interpretations for early medieval grave goods are available (Härke, 2014) a common apprehension is that some of these objects had a magical function and as such were deliberate depositions. Their presence is suggestive of the retention of some pre-conversion practices being carried over into a Christianised society, though this does not of necessity require the survival of overtly pagan worldviews (Blair 2005, 170). Indeed, the continuation of depositions in burials into the later Middle Ages points to an ongoing reconciliation between Christian and earlier indigenous practices (Gilchrist 2020, 143).

There is no suggestion of any clerical rejection of grave goods and the inclusion of a pectoral cross in Cuthbert’s coffin both enables parallels to similar crosses deposited in lay graves (Blair 2005, 173) and awards ecclesiastical legitimacy to deposition which must have been perceived as having some agency. These crosses may, as previously described in Chapter One, have contained relics, a feature which begins to further blur the distinction between overtly Christian and traditional practices through the implication of material supernatural agency. The use of relics in early medieval society is firmly established in the contemporary sources, for example in the gifting of Cuthbert’s hair (EH IV 32) and Wilfred’s wearing of a *chrismarium* (*Life of Wilfred* 34) and is suggested in the material record through artefacts such as Cuthbert’s pectoral cross and proposition that cylindrical copper alloy containers may have been used to store relics or *brandea* (Gibson 2022, 70-73). This may all appear somewhat confusing to modern audiences, who may apply an essentialist perspective, not least when Christian relics and magic appear to be used for the same effect when the two belief systems are often apprehended as being mutually opposed. Here Lawrence-Mathers (2007, 88-90) offers two apposite observations in that early medieval people were evidently able to differentiate between what was and what was not acceptable and, secondly, these

definitions did not stay static over time. This last point is reinforced by Alcuin's complaint to Æthelheard over the late 8<sup>th</sup> century apotropaic wearing of amulets containing relics and quotations from scripture (Yorke 2006, 252), a practice which may have meant something very different to Wilfred a generation earlier.

Although the prevalence of magical thought in Northumbria is demonstrable, not least through its referencing in penitentials, it was referenced only once in the written interpretation of the case study sites. In the contested 'first person' panels at the National Museum of Scotland (Ascherson 2000, 82-83; Clarke 2000) visitors can read that 'Some of our leaders learnt how to make their spellings, in the Latin of the priests, the ways of the Irish or the runes of the Vikings. Some magic lives in writing.' Apart from this sole example there was no other observable inclusion in either interpretative schemes or in the associated guidebooks. This lacuna does not help develop insight into a world where it was believed that nature and the material could be actively fashioned and controlled and where the exercising of such power, be it Divine or through human agency, was routinely observed and acknowledged. This is equally true of the miraculous as it is for the apotropaic or magical and suggests differing meanings for a variety of artefacts and hagiographical reports. Thus, the otters who dry Cuthbert's feet as he comes from the sea after a night of prayer (Bede *Life of Cuthbert* 10) may not do so as some act of kindness because of his affection for nature (e.g. Kingsnorth 2023) and an alternative reading is that Bede's inclusion of the story, and others regarding the natural world, may be to demonstrate the power inherent in Cuthbert's holiness by the control he can exert over the natural world (Whitehead 2020, 22)

Placed together, magic and relics offer an insight into the early medieval mind where people are not merely sentient observers of repeatable processes in the way of modern science but rather participants in a dynamic, interconnected universe. This is a universe where God reigns supreme, but also one of spirits and animism where human performances have agency and change outcomes. Regardless of positivistic dismissals, elements of this continue to find voice in modern society through things as varied as horoscopes, the belief that crystals have healing powers and fortunes can be 'manifested' from a compliant universe. Some modern observers might add religious faith to such a list which in the early medieval context may be entirely appropriate. Anglians inhabited a world where Christianity and a spectrum of other

beliefs not only co-existed but also informed each other (Blair 2005, 485-486) and it is this outlook that needs to be communicated if the period is to be authentically interpreted. Yet despite the importance of using the concept of the magical to interpret the early medieval world, the apparent reluctance of interpreters to do so is notable. A number of reasons may be hypothesised for this, not least that the word ‘magic’ itself may be understood by contemporary visitors in a variety of different ways ranging from the sleight of hand of the stage magician to an engagement in the occult. Equally, it may be that the prevalence of a positivistic worldview makes magical and, indeed, religious claims unintelligible to modern audiences and opens an avenue for dismissal or even ridicule. This may be understood through the Foucauldian category of subjugated knowledge (Foucault 1980) where dominant, hegemonic, discourses delegitimise and suppress others. In the academic context, Houlbrook and Armitage report a necessity of self-censorship in regard to the metaphysical or magical:

There are simply some words in academia which have lost their credibility – or never possessed it to begin with. *Supernatural* is one such word; *magic*, defiantly included in the title of this volume, is another. These words have become taboo; academic anathemas. We politely tiptoe around them, employing ‘safer’ substitute phrases such as *ritual*, *popular piety*, *spiritual beliefs*, and so on. And even when scholars are careful to avoid using the words *magic*, *supernatural*, *superstition*, *folklore*, etc., such studies concerned with these topics are still considered fringe; they linger on the edges of ‘respectable’ disciplines, not quite falling into academic oblivion but never managing to establish themselves as key, estimable subjects. (Houlbrook and Armitage 2015, 2)

This claim may, however, need to be balanced against the volume of publication concerning the materiality of magic that continues to emerge from archaeological contexts (e.g. Gilchrist 2008 and 2020, 110-144; Augé 2022). While the relationship between heritage professionals and the academy is reportedly uneven, where professionals may be regarded as service providers rather than fellow researchers (Emberling and Petit 2019, 8), it may nonetheless be that any scholarly hesitancy over the magical is transferred into interpretative contexts. This is, however, a somewhat speculative explanation for what is an interesting absence.

## c. The Practice of Belief

### 1. Touching the Divine

One of the more modest inclusions in the exhibition at the Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre is an assemblage of twelve fish vertebrae (Figure 6 and above p.170) recovered during the 2022 excavation of a grave in the cemetery to the east of the monastic site (Jackson et al 2022). The vertebrae had been deliberately holed to enable them to be strung together although there was no indication of what had been used to achieve this. Their inclusion in the grave, apparently worn around the neck of the individual, is suggestive of deliberate deposition. Subsequently, the vertebrae were interpreted in the visitor centre exhibition as:

Beads. 8th-9th centuries. Prayer beads, made from modified spinal bones of salmon or trout found around the neck of a skeleton in the cemetery (Label, Lindisfarne Priory)

The widespread devotional use of fish vertebrae is suggested through their repeated excavation in medieval ecclesiastical contexts throughout Europe (Makowiecki et al 2021). The basis for the identification of the Lindisfarne vertebrae as prayer beads is based on such parallels (DigVentures 2022), although it appears to have encouraged popular misidentification as a rosary (Brown 2023). Rosaries are largely considered features of a later spiritual practice which emerged in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Miller 2002, 7) and distinct from the earlier use of sets of beads known as a Pater Noster (Orme 2021, 182-183). The use of prayer beads is suggested in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Gilchrist 2012, 157) and excavation in Nivelles in modern Belgium has revealed beads associated with the grave of the Abbess Gertrude (d.659) (Miller 2002, 89). Exactly how these beads may have been used is uncertain although the practice of multiple repetitions of the *Jesus Prayer*, the Psalms, and the *Pater Noster* is well attested from the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Egyptian monastic practice. The implication is that strings of beads and prayer ropes may have been used to keep a tally of recitations (Miller 2002, 88-89) and there are suggestions that this was an Irish practice by the 6<sup>th</sup> century (2002, 88). The



confirmation of 8<sup>th</sup> century usage in Northumbria would be an insight not only into individual piety but also devotion outside of the Mass and monastic offices.



Figure 6.1 Display case at Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre. The prayer beads are centre bottom. Ian Colson.

The revised dating of the vertebrae between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries (Cole 2024) has, however, undermined this interpretation although it was observed still in place at Lindisfarne in September 2024 and as such remains considered here. As artefacts, the vertebrae invite the viewer to reflect on how it might have felt to hold them and, perhaps, what they might have felt to have used them in prayer:

*If these beads are for prayer, what must they have felt like? They look too small. How might they have run through the fingers? What prayers were said with them? When*

*I've used a rosary, it's been strangely important to have the sound of them clacking together. I kind of roll the beads through my fingers. Would these have felt the same?* (Field Book, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2023).

Such artefacts connect the viewer with the original owner, something in which, even with their familiar gaze, curators could join:

It's a lovely interpretation, it's inviting...typically, on our mediaeval sites, we've got some rosary beads particularly from Rievaulx and Whitby, but we only have survivors of the, of amber and jet. We don't have survivors of bone, or wood. And it's just an amazing that these, this fishbone that actually survived at all, then just fine. But that implies that the whole necklace was made of organic [material] and likely to have been all those vertebrae. They are incredibly fragile. I think they would obviously been less fragile, when fresher. But I think they wouldn't have stood that much touching. They wouldn't have been a lifelong possession. (B16 25:51)

The question of tactility is frequently considered in the material approach where touch is considered the most instinctive of senses, conferring a reality which might otherwise be questioned: 'more than seeing is believing, touching is believing' (de Witte 2015, 262). This assists in the interpretation of, for instance, bullaun, an example of which is included in the interpretation at Kirkmadrine:

PEBBLES AND PRAYER. The smooth dimples on this 'bullaun' stone have been caused by people turning pebbles on to it as they prayed. At a time when Mass was reserved for the clergy, this ancient folk custom was a way for ordinary people to participate in their religion. (Panel, Kirkmadrine).

There is, however, need for caution in that 'there is a long history of speculation about the function of bullauns, almost entirely based on conjecture' (Dolan 2012, 45). Primarily an Irish phenomenon, difficulties in dating and categorising bullaun have led to a wide variety of suggestions for their use ranging from the support of pietistic practices, because of their clear relationship with pilgrimage sites, to an association with metal working (Dolan 2009, 2012). It may be that the attraction of their promotion as devotional aids lies in an intuitive

understanding of the necessary tactility required in their creation. Overall, however, the meaning and function of bullaun remains occluded.

Heritage sites are tactile places evidenced not least by the plethora of signage restraining visitors from touching, climbing, sitting, and walking (Figure 6.2) This may be understood as an acculturation of a necessary preservation regime, but nonetheless one necessitated at some expense for the creation of meaning. The recognition of the importance of tactility in visitor engagement has, however, led to the advocational of touch as an interpretative mechanism (Pye 2008) although no examples of such an approach were observed at the case study sites other than activities which appeared to have been designed for children. Nonetheless, a perhaps unauthorised exception to this was observed at the Whithorn Priory Museum where visitors were observed tracing the interlacing on worked stone with their fingers. Unlike other sites with various forms of physical or textual barriers, the placing of the stones facilitated reaching out to touch them although this is not recorded as an interpretative aim (Yeoman 1989). Those who were observed touching did so almost automatically, though on reaching out some drew back apparently unsure whether they had the permissions to do so or not. Undoubtedly, however, meaning was being created and the time distance of over a thousand years dissolved as the same sensation was shared with the ‘able minds and practiced hands’ (Foster and Cross 1989) who first conceived them.



Figure 6.2. Sign at Lindisfarne Priory, September 2024. Ian Colson.

In a similar way, the assemblage found in Cuthbert's coffin in 1827 also invites reflection on its tactility. The ivory comb,<sup>18</sup> displayed in the Great Kitchen at the Durham Open Treasure exhibition (Figure 6.3), has received relatively little recent scholarly investigation. Its ubiquitous style is recognised in the text of the interpretative label that places it either as a personal possession of Cuthbert or equally of a later date and potentially a deposition during the 11<sup>th</sup> century translation (also Michelli 2003). Although several museum websites describe a liturgical use of combs during the priestly preparation for the saying of Mass (e.g. British Museum, undated; Cotswold Archaeology 2024; Victoria and Albert Museum 2024) this interpretation is only secure from the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Achverdjanová and Foletti 2021, 89-90). Evidence from late antiquity suggests the use of combs in baptismal rites where they appear to have been used both to part the hair before anointing and as a reflection of a new physical and spiritual cleanliness brought about by conversion and baptism (2021, 87-88). This ambiguity is, however, avoided at Durham where no reference is made to liturgical use in the physical interpretation where 'it was probably used by the monks who looked after St Cuthbert's body. Alfred Fitz-Westou, sacristan in the early-11th century, is said to have frequently combed the saint's hair and beard' (Label, Durham Cathedral Open Treasure). Use before services and in the consecration of bishops is, however, referenced in the most recent website revision (Durham Cathedral 2025). The suggestion of hair and a beard of sufficient length to require combing perhaps runs contrary to the popular imagery of the clean-shaven saint of Victorian stained-glass windows (e.g. Figure 6.4) although a hirsute representation of Cuthbert appears on a 12<sup>th</sup> century wall painting in the Cathedral's Galilee Chapel (Durham Cathedral 2024). Nonetheless, the comb is an intimate artefact. The different sizes of teeth on either side suggests use on the hair and the beard while the hole in the centre appears to be for the thumb of the comber to grip it, inviting the viewer to consider how it must have felt to have been used and what the context of this use was.

The association with initiation offers a further perspective on the use of the comb. In one of the few early medieval references to combs in an ecclesiastical context, Bede records Pope Boniface (619-625) sending a letter to Queen Æthelburh, accompanied by gifts of a silver mirror and an ivory comb adorned with gold (EH II 11). Whilst these gifts might be viewed

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<sup>18</sup> Durham Cathedral: DURCL: 18.9.1

as fitting for a high-status woman, the context of the letter is one of Boniface urging Æthelburh to facilitate the conversion of her husband, Edwin. In this way the comb is gifted alongside the request to pursue conversion and baptism. While it has been suggested that the inclusion of combs in pre-conversion burials is indicative of some symbolic meaning (Geake 1997, 63) it may be that a new significance was introduced through the context of early medieval Christian initiation (Achverdjanová and Foletti 2021, 89-90). In this way the comb sent by Boniface, and by implication that of Cuthbert, may have carried a meaning concerned with baptism that would have been evident to Bede's contemporary readers.



Figure 6.3 St Cuthberts's Comb (above) and the segments of the Portable Altar. Durham Cathedral Open Treasure. Ian Colson.





Figure 6.4 Detail of the face of St Cuthbert, 19<sup>th</sup> century painted coloured glass window from the ambulatory around the Ruthwell Cross. Percy Bacon & Bros, Ruthwell Parish Church, Dumfries. Ian Colson.

The inclusion of grave goods in Cuthbert's coffin is an early example of the medieval practice of the staging of clerical burials through the inclusion of vestments and altarware. It became increasingly common for bishops and priests to be interred in full eucharistic vestments together with pewter mortuary pattens and chalices (Daniell 1996, 168) or, in the case of the episcopacy, examples made of precious metal (Rodwell 2005, 184). The meanings behind this practice are uncertain (Daniell 1996, 168), although it has been suggested that it parallels the inclusion of weapons in lay burials as symbols of masculinity and power (Gilchrist 2009). As the English Reformation began in earnest, aside from the ideological deconstruction of their cult, the saints' shrines were dismantled and systematically stripped of anything of value (Knowles 1976, 238-239; Duffy 2005). The 1827 discovery of the pectoral cross, the portable altar and vestments points to them being survivors of wider depositions

lost during this process. The 7<sup>th</sup> century date of the altar suggests that Cuthbert may have been interred with a variety of artefacts from the outset, a symbolic assemblage of his work as a priest and a bishop and perhaps something which he may have anticipated in his lifetime. Although the comb has only been dated stylistically, if a 7th century date is allowed it too can form part of this group of artefacts which define priesthood. As the intention behind the deposition of medieval clerical grave goods remains uncertain, it is likely that the different segments of the audience will construct individual meanings. For this researcher, a sometime Church of England priest, these were quite distinctive:

*I find myself thinking that the altar is quite small. How would it have been used and would the patten and chalice sit easily on it – I'm making an assumption that they did? It's difficult to get a sense of it in the form that it is now. More than this, though, what did it mean to Cuthbert as he celebrated on it? Would he have felt like me, that sense of awe and closeness and mystery? Would he have become annoyed with himself when he was distracted or sometimes when believing was difficult mechanistically clung to it in trust? Did he ask for it to be buried with him or where his brethren trying to make sense of his death? Did he know they'd do it? Did he believe he would be resurrected literally and as he entered new life it would be there beside him? It makes me think about my own will and asking to be buried in an alb with my white stole. Why? Perhaps a sense of it all somehow being brought together at the end? (Field Book, 24 May 2023).*

## **2. Entrusting to the Divine.**

The visitor entering the 2023 refurbished exhibition in the Lindisfarne Priory visitor centre is met with a case containing over twenty complete and partial name stones recovered from the site and surrounding area. The stones are displayed in a double-sided case which allows the viewer to observe both faces, an important feature for those stones where both sides bear some decoration or inscription (Figure 6.5).



Figure 6.5. Display of Name Stones, Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre September 2024.  
Ian Colson.



The interpretation enables the full collection of stones to be displayed. This was a deliberate decision so that the development of the form of the stones and continuity of the practice involving them could be displayed and ‘four generations’ could be brought into the interpretative narrative (B16 08:39). Using the complete assemblage of stones enabled a fuller interpretative scheme:

And it was also, there's no single one that's identical to another. There are some similar in styles, but they're each very unique. And so what you might have noticed, as you read the labels for each is the story gathered, as you went on each one, and you learn a different point about each one. If I'd have done two, three or four of them, the labels to get all that information across would have been huge, and almost too much for people as well. So, the impetus came from that, and I had a very strong sense that I wanted to display as many as possible at times during the development of the display, and the increasing costs and things like that. I was challenged too – ‘can we reduce this’? And I strongly opposed that, because of what I just said. I think the volume of them really spoke to that that early community, and I felt it's so important to establish that. (B16 08:39)

While there is no evidence to suggest that the early Northumbrian Church had a developed doctrine of purgatory, although there was some recognition of some form of intermediate state (EH V 12), the belief that the living could intercede on behalf of the dead was a fundamental core of the religious praxis of the period. This could be achieved through prayer, the celebration of Masses and the giving of alms (Foot 2006, 202, 211, 317-8; Blennemann 2020). This is particularly evident from monastic sites where stone monuments with epigraphs requesting intercession for the dead have been recovered (Foxhall Forbes 2013, 246), such as that from the 2001 excavation at Whitby Abbey inscribed with the intercession to *Orate Pro* (pray for) (Lang 2002). It was noticeable, however, that this concept of praying for the dead was not reflected in the Lindisfarne interpretation where, instead, the interpretative panel reads: ‘according to Christian belief, their [name stones] purpose was as a label for a sleeping body awaiting Judgement Day, when the eternal soul would be resurrected and held to account before Christ’ (Panel, Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre). This is a difficult statement to reconcile with Christian doctrine not least in that the labelling of the dead, where it occurs, is not a religious requirement rather a social practice. It does, however, resonate with the work of Jill Hamilton Clements (2017) who suggests that a key aspect of Northumbrian belief was the need to ensure that the name of the dead was not forgotten and

was written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:12). This theme has been developed to account for the apparent prevalence and usage of *Libri Vitae*, anomalies such as those name stones which show no wear and seem to have been buried alongside those they record (2017, 15-23) and the suggestion that the decoration of name stones was deliberately intended to recall the incipit pages of manuscripts (Maddern 2013, 225). This has led to the claim that the forgotten ran the risk of oblivion:

Since being forgotten by God (and thus consigned to the oblivion of hell) was the greatest threat to the soul, the inscribed text offered a means by which one might maintain a presence amongst the living petitioners in this world and at once prefigure and aid one's metaphorical inscription in heaven (Hamilton Clements 2017, 39).

Although space does not permit a fuller discussion, such an understanding presents several theological difficulties that would likely have been evident for many Northumbrians. That hell might equate to oblivion could be understood as modern overlay on Anglian Christian belief. Bede (EH V 12) describes hell as a physical place, one of eternal torment where condemned individuals remained identifiable, a belief featuring in other early medieval sources (Boeing 2000, 88). Equally problematic is the claim that an omniscient, all knowing, God could forget the souls of the dead as against the prevalent early medieval belief of God acting as a righteous judge. It suggests that people were unable to differentiate between the literal and the allegoric or metaphorical in the expression of their belief despite the role of the symbolic in, for instance, the creation of meaning in early medieval ecclesiastical art. Furthermore, in terms of materiality, if some form of naming was a ubiquitous key belief there is a need to understand why name stones are not more numerous and why they appear localised to sites such as Lindisfarne and Hartlepool. This does not negate the relationship with memorialisation nor diminish the attempt to make the concept more relatable for audiences. It does, however, imply a possibly uncritical interpretative adoption of a singular academic discourse.

The Lindisfarne interpretation goes on to note that 'reading name stones may have been part of Christian worship known as *Lectio Divina*, a method of scriptural reading allowing prayer and meditation to promote communion with God' (Panel, Lindisfarne Priory Visitor Centre). The practice of *Lectio Divina* has roots in the teachings of the Early Church Fathers

(especially Origen and the Alexandrian School) and in the practice of third century Egyptian monasticism (Keator 2018, 44-45). It is most closely associated with Benedict of Nursia and the Benedictine tradition (Keator 2018, 54-55). However, in none of these traditions is it recorded as being associated with a reflection on the single name of the dead, something which might be considered as worship in only the broadest of definitions. *Lectio Divina* is instead a process through which the individual reads and reflects on passage of scripture using a process of silence, prayer and repetition with the hope of insight of and engagement with the Divine.

Whilst there might be some contestation of the interpretation at Lindisfarne, the intent is clearly to offer an insight into the meaning that the people who created and placed the name stones gave to them and to do so through a narrative approach that revivifies, and remembers, the names that the stones record awarding those individuals agency. This may offer a sufficient explanation of the stones meaning – that of one reflecting the expression of an innate human desire to recognise and record those who have gone before, not least in offering the viewer the opportunity to reflect on their own mortality. Equally, they may reflect the ancient Christian tradition of prayer for the dead being considered an act of charity on the part of the living, a feature evidenced in early medieval thinking (Blennemann 2020, 278-279) and which by ancient tradition took place in place in cemeteries around the graves of the martyrs (Donnovan 1978, 422). Overall, it seems clear that graves acted as places of prayerful memory (Blennemann 2020, 293) and so a simpler explanation of the name stones may be one where they functioned to facilitate this reflective process and their production was related to some form of status within, or regard by, a wider community.

The development of the interpretation of the name stones had a powerful impact on one professional working with them:

And the more I studied them, the more I realised the connections with the Day of Judgement, and the connections, both from the original altar stone and the judgement stone, and the, like the cross of the judgement scene on the cross, and the Viking raiders stone with the judgement day there. And it became much more, I really started to understand more about that community's thinking, and the imminent judgement day

that what was expected to happen, what they had to do to reduce the threats, and also, that whole idea of the Bamburgh lords and the earls in that they're literally buying their way through purgatory. And so all of these ideas combined, and then of course, you're stymied by how much text you can actually write and so very, very limited on word count, all the way through. So, I still feel as though I haven't been able to explore all of those ideas, but it's a route in for people if they're interested. (B16 17:32).

It is tempting to speculate why the theme of judgement appeared to be something previously unexplored especially when eschatology is so firmly embedded in the Christian tradition. One avenue of investigation might be to consider whether the received narratives of Lindisfarne and its associated saints are dominated by pre-existing discourses which actively underplayed those aspects of lived belief which did not accord with later outlooks. Elements of this can be found in the relative absence of a consideration of judgement and prayer for the dead as a feature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Celtic revival within Protestant Christian denominations (Bradley 2018) and in the hagiographies which emerged from the established, Protestant, Victorian churches of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Equally, the more modern use of Northumbrian Christianity in emphasising environmental themes (e.g. Kingsnorth 2023) may result in the downplaying of other theological strands (Martin 2004). B16's description of the difficulties in conveying complex religious contexts within limited word counts is nonetheless helpful in that demonstrates the challenges in conveying meaning to an audience who may judge such things inaccessible. It is to its credit that the interpretation at Lindisfarne seeks to rebalance this.

Early medieval memorialisation had many forms. The Whitby Town Museum displays a fragment of 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century crosshead the epigraph on which is interpreted as 'probably [+] AHHAE + and refers to OE (Old English) female name Acha, who was the sister of king Edwin, mother of king Oswald and therefore great-aunt of Whitby's 2nd abbess Alfflaed' (Panel, Whitby Town Museum). Such direct reference to known historical characters is notable. Other wider examples include the dedication stone of St Paul's church in Jarrow which, while no longer in its original context (Cramp 1984; 2005), is still visible on the western face of the tower crossing arch within the church while a replica is displayed at Jarrow Hall. The dedication is dated by reference to Ecfrið's reign and Ceolfrið's abbacy and

suggests wider forms of memorialisation and commemoration than simply for those who had died.

Overall, little reference was made at any of the case study sites to burial practices. In part this may be because of assumptions about the absence of grave goods in Christian burials and a uniformity of inhumation ritual and performance. Reference was made at Lindisfarne, however, where excavation had revealed a quantity of quartz pebbles:

Quartz pebbles, 7th-9th centuries. Many white quartz stones have been found amongst graves from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery. White quartz was not found locally, so these stones may have been placed by pilgrims seeking spiritual intervention. (Panel, Lindisfarne Priory).

The practice of deposition of quartz in and around graves has been noted in inhumations as early as the Mesolithic and continued at least into the high Middle Ages (Daniell 1996, 163; Fowler and Cummings 2003; Ahola 2017, 207). It has been suggested that there is a correlation between deposition in early Christian sites and an affiliation to Irish expressions of Christianity (Crowe 1982, 414). Darvill (2002, 84-85) suggests a Christian re-purposing of a Neolithic or early Bronze Age ritual usage of quartz related to beliefs about the spirits of the dead and lunar cycles while Lash (2018) locates them in an early medieval taskscape (below, p. 265) where the action of the sea in smoothing quartz held significance. Crowe (1982, 414) advocates an interpretation where pebbles acted as mechanism for counting repetitive prayers in the manner of Egyptian monasticism. Further possible explanations may be gained from the Book of Revelation where, in the context of resistance to erroneous belief, ‘to everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it’ (Revelation 2:17, *NRSV*), or in Bede’s reference to writing the name of the devil on a white stone in his *Commentary on Tobias* (Crowe 1982, 414), albeit there is no material record of this. Regardless, it remains the case that the meaning of these stones is occluded, if indeed a single meaning can be applied.

Aside from those excavated at Lindisfarne, quartz pebbles, together with other white stones, were recovered in quantity at Whithorn where they were associated in the inner precinct with four focal graves, dated between the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 8<sup>th</sup>, possibly acting as a covering layer over them (Hill 1997, 472-473). They were present elsewhere on the site there was evidence of varying distributions, both spatially and stratigraphically (1997, 473), which whilst supportive of a ritual function is also suggestive of different modes of performance presumably with changing and evolving meanings. These finds are unreferenced in the Whithorn Visitor Centre exhibition display and, although any interpretation of early medieval quartz deposition is likely to be speculative, they are nonetheless a consistent feature of the site.

### **3. Worked Stone**

The most visually dominant Northumbrian artefacts observed at the case study sites were worked stones. Whilst they may only represent a fraction of Northumbrian artistic output, not least those now lost works of a culture more familiar with wood than stone, they remain powerful visual memes. These artefacts include balusters, grave covers and name stones together with fragments of high crosses and numerous other sculpted pieces. Some, such as the Raider Stone at Lindisfarne are iconic representations of the period whereas others are more obscure. The meaning of most is, however, disrupted in that they largely sit outside of the landscape or building for which they were fashioned, and thus the intelligibility awarded by context is necessarily lost (Blair 2005, 478; Orton 2003, 89; Hawkes 2013, 42; 2021, 209). This hiatus comes about in part through the antiquarian collection and concentration of some of the most significant worked stone at nodal sites, for example at Durham Cathedral and Kirkmadrine or, more recently, the loan or accession of excavated stone to related museums and exhibitions (e.g. Whitby and Lindisfarne). Much worked stone is fragmentary having come from either now lost buildings or, where there is distinct Christian iconography, having suffered during intermittent waves of historic iconoclastic zeal. The effects of over a millennium of weathering and wear have become part of their biographies. The discovery, and occasional re-uniting, of fragments is not infrequently accompanied by accounts of remarkable survival as they were found in church walls, in field boundaries, as lintels in

farmhouses or even being used as gate posts (Forsyth and Maldonado 2013, 5-6; Hawkes 2021, 212-213).

Some fragments were displayed in ways which encouraged the viewer to see them in their original form. This was especially true of crossheads, the arms of crosses, and cross shafts which were often presented on pillars to give an impression of height. The main Historic Environment Scotland display at Whithorn, together with those at Durham, Lindisfarne and some elements at the National Museum of Scotland, had been conceived to enable the viewer to see all the worked sides of much of their displayed stone. This enhances the making of meaning, in contrast to those occasions where working is hidden by placement against walls (Hawkes 2021, 210) causing multi-faced artefacts to be viewed largely through one plane. Overall, worked stone had been liberated from an imprisonment behind glass, allowing a more intimate and, as noted above, occasionally tactile encounter.

Despite these advantages, however, the interpretation of worked stone has proved challenging. As early as 1976 Peter Hunter Blair observed the propensity for worked stones, and especially high crosses, to be viewed through an aesthetic lens that subalterns any suggestion of the theological and social meanings that they were likely made to convey (1976, 141). Comments by Jane Hawkes (2021) suggest that little has changed in the intervening years as she notes the sharp contrast between the way that the British Museum, as representative national institution, presents sculpture not as archaeology but as art to be examined and interrogated. This is manifested by the display of individual pieces divorced from any meaningful attempt to suggest an original context, something which stands in sharp contrast to other leading European museums where the interpretation of worked stone places it in the setting of the buildings or landscapes for which it was created (2021, 216-217). Noting the paucity of early medieval insular sculpture on display at the British Museum, Hawkes goes on to negatively compare its presentation against that of Greek sculpture which is exhibited in its own purpose-built gallery (2021, 216). As Hawkes concludes: 'It demonstrates quite clearly that the sculptural heritage valued and claimed by Britain is not the early medieval; indeed, it is not even its own heritage' (2021, 218).

Despite the overwhelming volume of evidence pointing towards the richness of its decoration (Hawkes 2013, 42-43), early medieval sculpture is almost inevitably presented as unadorned natural stone. Only one instance, at Durham Cathedral, was noted where an interpretation moved beyond generalised references in panels and on labels. Here, a fragment of interlaced cross shaft was illuminated using an LCD projector which overlayed a coloured reconstruction onto its surface and so gave some impression of the visual impact of the stone in its original context:

CARVED STONES AND COLOUR. Many Anglo-Saxon carved stones, especially free-standing crosses, were brightly painted and decorated with pieces of coloured glass and metal. They stood out in the landscape and the pictures and inscriptions would have been much easier to read. Over time the colours have worn away, but this projection suggests how they might have looked. (Panel, Open Treasure)

This relatively simple interpretative approach transformed the viewing experience and opened otherwise hidden avenues of meaning for the observer. Overall, however, the case study sites offered little to lead the viewer to the appreciation that ‘the carved stone monuments erected across the landscape of Anglo-Saxon England, and even the panels and friezes used to decorate churches .... were colourful, eye-catching monuments, glittering in the sunshine and the flickering light of candles and lamps inside the churches.’ (Hawkes, 2021, p. 220). This is a considerable loss, especially when sculpture retaining its pigmentation, such as the relatively recently discovered Lichfield Angel (Rodwell et al 2008), demonstrates the sophistication of early medieval decoration.

The reasons for this interpretative approach remain uncertain. It does, however, reflect a dominant aesthetic discourse which privileges undecorated sculpture. This discourse is perhaps most evident in western museums and galleries where, despite voluminous evidence of the use of now lost pigmentation (e.g. Kiilerich 2016; Stager 2022), white marble classical statuary remains as celebrated now as it has been for the last three hundred years. Overall, British public sculpture and memorialisation from the 18<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has fêted natural stone, dwelling in an intellectual ‘chromophobia’ where colour is of the other - it contaminates an essential, existential, purity (Batchelor 2000 & 2014). This extends into the



modern idiom through the control of the aesthetics of formal public spaces not least in churchyards and cemeteries where, in what are likely one of the few places where the use of stone sculpture remains customary, the form, style and decoration of memorials are tightly controlled and the use of pigmentation largely prohibited (e.g. Diocese of Durham 2012, 2). Hints of this aesthetic discourse are suggested in interpretive strategies such as the advocacy of the ‘simple and contemplative’ in the display of the Whithorn stones (Yeoman 1989, 329), and in interpretative schemes through descriptions such as a ‘simple, elegant chevron design’ (Panel, Whitby Abbey).

Any attempt to re-pigment early medieval worked stone for interpretative purposes would be highly controversial. Aside from conservation issues, the resolution of the forms of decoration would likely prove elusive, something which extends also to the authenticity of replicas. Even when the remnants of pigments can be identified, if indeed they can be identified with any great accuracy (Hawkes 2003a, 28), there is a near certainty of multiple decorative schemes and repairs having impacted on a sculpture’s visual agency over its lifetime (Kiilerich 2006, 3). The resultant question becomes one of what, or perhaps when, a decorative scheme should be restored to. In this way an interpreter is likely to have to reconcile themselves with the presentation of decoration being largely conjectural. This does not explain, however, the lacuna of pigmented replicas nor the limited use of pictorial representation. These do exist, such as in the small visitor centre adjacent to the Bewcastle Cross shaft in Northumberland (Figure 6.6), but their scarcity supports the view of the normativity of the presentation of bare stone. It is difficult not to conclude that modern aesthetics have considerable influence in interpretative schemes and wonder whether much display design is directed by dominant museological discourses which can suppress innovation, or perhaps deviation, in favour of the financially led ‘bland uniformity of the generic’ (Macleod et al 2017, 2). This is an area where digital reconstructions might offer considerable potential in the presentation of multiple forms of the same object, which would be able to appeal to several interpretative themes.



Figure 6.6. Painting mounted on the wall of the visitors' centre at Bewcastle showing a conjectural, stylised, reconstruction of the Bewcastle Cross in its original context, September 2022. Ian Colson.

A further interpretative challenge is the apparent naivety of much early medieval sculpture to modern audiences (Hawkes 2013, 44-45). This is especially true of figures which when placed against the aesthetic privileging of the forms of ancient Greek or Roman statuary can appear to suffer from issues of detail, scale and perspective. No interpretative attempt was observed suggesting that these apparent anomalies could be understood as deliberate vehicles

intended to carry meaning, where place and proportion may act as a device to convey importance or role (Hawkes 2013, 44).

A significant interpretative challenge appeared to be one of finding ways to suggest what worked stone might have meant for those for whom it was created. Where this was considered, interpretations rarely moved beyond the restatement of basic tenets of Christian belief. At Durham and Lindisfarne the meaning of the cross was explained as a symbol of Christ's resurrection and Christian hope:

Marking out places of holiness and prayer, these preaching crosses were a common and important form of Anglo-Saxon Christian monument and an imposing reminder of the central message of Christianity. They recall the wooden cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified and symbolise his sacrifice to redeem humankind. (Panel, Open Treasure).

Stone crosses were a reminder of Christ's death and resurrection and the Christian belief in the hope of salvation. The rich patron who commissioned each cross, and possibly the craftworker who carved it, were making an offering to God. (Panel, Lindisfarne Priory).

Laying aside the question whether standing crosses might be understood as preaching crosses (Blair 2005, 227-8; Coatsworth 2015; Hawkes 2021, 223 note 28), as might be expected the Durham interpretation emerges from a Christian context offering a definitive explanation of Christ's action on the Cross. Whilst this may reflect the understanding of a Christian early medieval audience both interpretations can equally be understood as an insight into interpreters' experience and expectation of modern audience understanding. This lack of familiarity with the vocabulary of Christian symbolism and iconography sometimes extended into the professional community where representational axioms of a Christianised past became moments of discovery:

So, we've got a lot of examples of some beautiful sort of carved Northumbrian crosses, and we've got a loan from Northallerton, and which is a beautiful cross, and 8th century. And only more recently, when (I was) doing a little bit of research on

this. It has five bosses on the front, and it's actually suggested that they represent the five wounds of Christ. (A07 14:30)

Even though some symbolic meanings have inevitably been lost, these difficulties in presenting the experience of religious belief in a secular society may account for the almost entire absence of lived experience led interpretations. An exception was at Whithorn where interlacing was referenced as a form of representation of eternity where ‘the act of following and mentally unravelling the designs may have been an aid to spiritual contemplation’ (Panel, HES Museum Whithorn). An overall interpretative hesitancy reflects, however, wider academic discourses where elements of meaning remain contested. While individual features, such as representations of Christ or the saints, may be reasonably identified, there is a recognition that different stones likely had different contextual functions and that even then the same symbolism could have multivalent interpretations for early medieval viewers (Cramp 2010; Coatsworth 2015). In a similar way, the absence of pigmentation may serve to diminish features which may have been central to the meaning intended for early medieval audiences (Hawkes 2003a, 25-27) or accentuate those which were not. This, however, should not become a counsel for interpretative despair. It can be said with some confidence that the Christian imagery of the Golden Age was fashioned to deepen belief and engagement with the Divine, whilst inculcating messages about the past, the present and the future (Hawkes 2013, 47).

## **e. Chapter Conclusions**

This chapter has attempted to identify themes which emerged in the presentation of Northumbrian belief through the lens of materiality and lived experience. Despite a well-defined intent on the part of professionals to create clear and accessible schemes where meaning can be created, overall it has described an absence of interpretative output engaging with the question of the lived belief experience of Northumbrian Christians. Unlike other areas of Anglian life, faith was rarely portrayed through narrative and little was observed that might encourage an empathy with lived belief.

It has been suggested that several factors have played a part in the fashioning of these interpretations. Perhaps most significantly, the limitations of space, word counts and resources clearly combine to constrain the ambition of interpreters developing physical schemes in attempting to convey complex meanings. Undoubtedly, advances in digital interpretation do, and will, overcome some of these problems, but these pragmatic barriers are co-joined with those which are less well defined. These include the inaccessibility of religious belief to many within largely secular audiences, something in which some professionals might share, as well as the considerable uncertainties around many aspects of early medieval Christian praxis; things and performances witnessed to only by incomplete material assemblages. Observation at the case study sites also suggests that interpretations are led by wider authorised discourses. These range from the privileging of aesthetic discourses in interpretative schemes through to a preference towards traditional narratives. All these problematise and frustrate the hearing of the voice of the individual located in their faith community despite the clear desire to revivify the lives of the past.

If overall the material and lived experience approaches to Northumbrian religion are judged to have had limited interpretative outcomes it does not necessarily follow that meaning has not been created; this chapter has identified moments where interpretations have done just that. Equally, authentic constructions can be born outside of the deliberate intentions of professionals. These might include spontaneous religious responses to artefacts and the place of the early medieval in the production of regional and national identities. It is to this question that the next chapter will turn.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: NORTHUMBRIAN CHRISTIANITY AND MODERN IDENTITY**

### **a. Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to review those elements of interpretation which suggested that Northumbrian Christian heritage was a component in the creation and maintenance of modern identities. Two distinct discourses became apparent during thematic analysis. Firstly, Anglian religious heritage was observed having agency in the modern creation of understandings of belonging and place. In Scottish institutions this was suggested within discourses that could be located in the ongoing debates around self-determination and the nation's place within the United Kingdom. In England it centred around concepts of the regional, especially that of the North East as a distinct entity. The second group of discourses were concerned with modern spiritual and religious identities and related to intersections of denominational polity, religious performance and museological practice, all mediated through the agency of professionals, audiences and believers. A sub-strand of this second grouping was observed in the growth of pilgrimage as an officially endorsed and facilitated activity, encouraged by claims of individual personal benefit which included the conference of identity, although open to suggestions of staging and being part of a heritagization of the religious past.

The use of heritage in the facilitation and creation of identity has been a source of significant critical investigation. Blossoming as a source of enquiry in the mid 1980's (Harrison 2013, 98-100), scholars such as David Lowenthal (1985), Patrick Wright (1985) and Robert Hewison (1987) began to deconstruct what came to be seen as the 'heritage industry' (Hewison 1987). Central to these far-reaching critiques was the view that heritage was a politicised social construction made from assemblages of the material and historical past where various elements were privileged in support of authorised identities. This process of manufacture was a reply to the de-industrialisation of Britain and the protracted extinction of imperial phantasms, and thus a pragmatic response to a loss of identities whilst attempting to introduce elements of economic regeneration centring on what social resources remained. A

corrective to the thrust of these debates was subsequently offered by John Urry (1990) who adopted Foucault's concept of gaze in the context of tourism and rejected the view that audiences were passive consumers of heritage, reinforcing instead that visitors have agency in its creation. This assertion of the agency of those who view and visit rather than inhabit heritage places engaged with a growing awareness of the implications of the distortions of 'othering' (Said 1995) and is one of the catalysts which has contributed to the growing emphasis on participatory engagement (Halpin 2007, 49-50; Arnold 2015, 318; Skeates 2017, 13-15). Rodney Harrison locates these discourses in what he terms the 'politics of representation' by which 'I mean the issues raised by the production of meaning by way of the various images, texts, objects and practices that surround heritage and museums' (2013, 107). The representation of people and the communities from which they emerge is intrinsically related to questions of identity (Woodward 2019, 433-439)

The claim that identity emerges from shared and personal associations with heritage continues to be debated and contested (Jones 2019) and as such is a 'slippery' concept (Smith 2006, 48) despite being a frequent and uncritical repetition (McLean 2006). One theorisation of the relational mechanism between heritage and identity is suggested by David Brett's (1996, 8-9) use of Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Habitus is created by past and present circumstances such as education and family background and thus becomes a 'system of dispositions which generate perceptions, appreciations and practices' (Maton 2014, 50). Perceptions of identity lie within the habitus where they are informed by the insights which a person's heritage awards, although it should be noted that other factors also contribute to this formation. Modernity, however, often erodes the acuties that received heritages provide and so Brett views habitus in contemporary society as being subject to an ongoing process of renegotiation with representations of the past (1996, 9). This points to the relationship between heritage and identity as dynamic rather than static and fixed. Developing this further, Smith (2006, 49) cautions against the uncritical acceptance that authorized forms of identity which emerge from the AHD will necessarily always be privileged in that heritage may also be used to contest them and thus subvert the discourses from which they have emerged. A suggestion of this may be found in Sheila Watson's (2019, 450-451) description of how local communities resisted professionally driven representations centred on folklore in a new museum development in Great Yarmouth in favour of an archaeological interpretation of a

nearby Roman site. The reasons for this centred on the belief that the authority which came from the formal interpretation of archaeological materiality awarded greater civic prestige and status than the intangible alternative thus facilitating the reshaping of the identity of a 'run down, deprived seaside town' (2019, 451).

The theorization of identity, value and significance continues to be obfuscated by varying definitions and methodologies where concepts such as culture and heritage often appear interchangeable. Whilst heritage bodies may attempt to provide overarching definitions the concept of social or cultural value, and its interconnectedness with identity, remains diffuse. Although there is widespread agreement that there is a profound interface between people's lives and the tangible and intangible heritage around them 'the heritage sector now encompasses a complex landscape of different, potentially incommensurate forms of value associated with different modes of evaluation' (Jones and Leech 2015, 5). Whilst there are various mechanisms by which the public benefit created by of heritage may be measured (e.g. English Heritage 2023; Sagger and Bezzano 2024) notions of socio-cultural value are ultimately connected with a societal creation of meaning which comes about through an attachment to places and their associated things (Jones and Lee 2015, 6; Robson 2023, 429). This generation of meaning is generally distinct from, although intersectional with, more quantifiable values found in sustainability, tourism and regeneration (Jones and Lee 2015, 6). Social value is dynamic because it is a part of a series of processes and cultural performances where things might be remembered or forgotten (Harrison 2013, 198-202). These performances are not static and may be diluted, dismissed or overtaken as the meanings they create exist in societies which continually add to the weight, or perhaps burden, of the heritage corpus whilst having no agreed mechanisms for the deaccession of places or things (2013, 166-7), a 'present drowning in its pasts' (2013, 167).

The social values which help form identity can be suppressed by other modes of significance: 'whilst the need for an assessment of social value is already recognised, it is still eclipsed in most cases by historic, scientific and aesthetic values, because the means of evaluating the latter are long established' (Jones and Lee 2015, 25). Scholars using a critical heritage studies scaffold locate the suppression of localised value through the subjugation by authorised



discourses of populist, non-expert, voices (Smith 2006; 2021; Smith and Waterton 2009, 29-30; Robson 2023, 429). This subalterning should not, however, be taken as purely an expert led endeavour as the performance of influential elements of the audience also acts to support and bolster the discourse (Smith 2021, 8-9). This has the effect of marginalising significant, yet liminal, groups who become in effect voiceless in the creation of meaning and their representation. This is where several researchers have located areas of overlooked and underappreciated value (e.g. Robson 2023, 430) which have historically received little consideration in wider assessments of significance. As this omission has become more apparent, a number of scholars have sought to offer methodologies which revivify the profile of social value in significance assessments. In this vein, Robson (2023) has recently advocated the importance of collaborative and participatory research to better map the interconnectedness of heritage meanings within the built environment. Her primarily ethnographic methodology invites reflection on the challenges faced by qualitative data collection and analysis in being given equal voice to quantitative meanings.

Whilst there has been work on the broader place of religious heritage in the creation of identity (e.g. Burchardt and Nur 2024), research amongst believers has frequently been concentrated around moments of tension, not least when the claims of faith groups over the ownership of places and things have collided with those from elsewhere. Religious identity is itself a problematic concept. Leite et al, in attempting to correlate identity, practice and belief, suggest that, for believers, ‘religious identity includes a given understanding of the relationship between the human and the sacred worlds, created beings and God, and sacred and profane’ (2023, 108). This immediately suggests the use of essentialisms and dualisms which some believers may not recognise.

The role which religious buildings play in the identity of modern English Christians has been shown to vary according to age, sex and denominational allegiance (Village and Francis 2021). These variations might be expected to extend into other areas of religious heritage too, arguing for the necessity of nuanced understandings of the relationship between heritage materialities and the conceptualisation of the religious self. More broadly, English cathedrals, have been the stage for investigations of visitor motivations (e.g. Gutic et al 2010) and,

although often located in pragmatism around their role as visitor attractions, their having agency in the processes of both individual and wider identities has been observed. Research into de-sacralised religious spaces and the agency of the religious in secular museums and galleries remains limited and has arisen more as a by-product of explorations of responses to materiality (e.g. Berns 2017). The degree to which heritage organisations conceptualise religious artefacts, places and performances as having any distinctive agency in questions of religious identity is uncertain, particularly when they come from the Christian tradition (Paine 2013, 38). A notable exception is, however, the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, the mission of which is to deploy their collection in the development of a wider, inclusive, human identity whilst challenging exclusion and fundamentalism in the sectarian context of a multicultural city (O'Neill 2006, 40-43). This suggests that religious heritage could have wider applications than may at first be appreciated.

## **b. Heritage, Social Value and Identity**

### **1. Identity in the North of England**

The theme of a Christian heritage that finds its locus in the early medieval period and which awards a particular identity to North East England appears pervasive in popular literature (e.g. Adam 2006; Wakefield 2008; Sadgrove 2013). This stands in contrast to other areas of the former Kingdom of Northumbria, such as modern Lancashire or Cheshire, where there is considerably less emphasis on an early medieval past. It may be that this is because these narratives, both tangible and intangible, are strongest in the North East or that other regions have different, stronger, inheritances on which they can draw. Equally, it may be the fruition of the staged promotion of tourism entering wider discourses. Regardless, some professionals shared the view that there was something distinctive about the relationship between the region and its Christian heritage, particularly around the memorialisation of Cuthbert:

...there's a feeling that your Cuthbert is the Saint of the Northeast, of the North. I think I mentioned to you the last time you were here, there's a particular phrase which is the Haliwerfolc, the people of the saint, and also the fact that we're, we were palatinate, so we had a prince bishop, not just an ordinary common garden bishop, a prince bishop. So, there's a great deal of local pride in that. Cuthbert again, his story is very well known even among people who have no religious leanings is very much seen as a local character. Most people have visited Lindisfarne at some point in the region, they know of the story they know of, of Cuthbert's journey. (B03 24:06)

This sense of regional importance was a consideration in the decision to erect a cenotaph to commemorate Cuthbert within Lindisfarne Priory:

...but I personally think it was it was giving something back to the site that was slightly missing. You know, and because it was swept because so many was swept away due to the 16th century, perhaps. Yeah, we could say, well, it should be left alone as it was. But something tells me that the story of Cuthbert and the site and the meaning of that the saint in the North, and the way that, it seems to me sort of being almost plucked away from that site. And, you know, celebrated elsewhere, I thought it was just giving it back a little bit, just a nod to the fact that, you know, there's something a bit more than just this ephemeral kind of memory, this sort of smoky memory of this guy who was there. (B09 17:59)

Despite such professional assertions, the degree to which the Northumbrian Church is an influential factor in contemporary regional identity remains an open question around which there has been limited research. Turner, Semple and Turner (2013, 177-187), working in support of the unsuccessful UNESCO World Heritage Site bid, concluded that multivalent meanings were applied by the local population to the heritage arising from the Jarrow and Monkwearmouth monasteries. Those with associations to the former monastic churches, which remain active places of worship, were more likely to report an appreciation of the religious nature of the sites whereas other groups located the extant remains within the modern landscape as places for recreation or, conversely, were more inclined to reference the industrial heritage of the area. This accords with a theorisation of cultural intangible heritage being both dynamic and dependant on the perceptions of intersecting communities (Vecco 2010). It might be argued that the time-distance from the 8<sup>th</sup> century acts to diminish the

place of the early medieval in local perceptions and, as post-industrial communities, comparisons might be made between Wearmouth/Jarrow and Stoke-on-Trent where the early medieval Staffordshire Hoard (Leahy et al 2015) is credited with being a marker in the creation and maintenance of the identity of the north Midlands. Morn Capper and Marc Scully (2016) reported heterogenous engagement with the Hoard's exhibition and their research conducted amongst volunteer museum guides (albeit a small, self-selecting sample) suggested that the Hoard had a significant local profile and was a source of civic pride in an otherwise disadvantaged post-industrial city. Notably, the narrative around the Hoard had become bound up in local discourses concerning identity and economic renewal. The interpretation of the artefacts, together with their assemblage and the context from which they were recovered, remains a source of academic debate (Webster et al 2011), yet the local narrative accentuated the perhaps somewhat accidental place of Stoke in the Hoard's biography overruling meanings which disputed a moral ownership by the city and privileging those which awarded identity (Capper and Scully 2016, 189-191). Why there should be a difference in the ownership of an early medieval heritage between Jarrow and Stoke is uncertain. It may be due to inherent differences in the outlook of the two communities or that Jarrow has other sources of identity which have become more relevant than its early medieval monastic past. Equally, it may be that the materiality of the gold and silver of the exhibited Hoard is more accessible to audiences than the preponderance of bulk finds and facsimiles displayed at Jarrow Hall or through the writings of Bede. It may also be an indicator that the religious past has diminishing leverage in the creation of belonging in contemporary, secular, society. Regardless, what was clear from respondents during this research is a persistent professional belief in a centrality of an early medieval religious heritage in the creation of regional identity in North East England and that this was a factor in determining interpretative direction. However, the accuracy of that belief appears to be largely anecdotal.

Despite professional utilisation, the creation of identity from early medieval materiality remains contentious within English heritage contexts because of its associations with the appropriation of the idea of the Anglo-Saxon by nationalist voices (Smith 2012, 54-55; Capper and Scully 2016, 182-183). The toleration of exclusive regional identities may, however, be somewhat different to national concerns in that acceptability may be achieved because of a commodification of staged regional authenticity (MacCannell 1973; Capper and

Scully 2016, 183). While ‘the perceived level of authenticity is controlled partly by media and partly by the people themselves’ (Chhabra, Hedly and Sills 2003, 715) ‘staging involves displacement of cultural production from one place to another and modification to fit new conditions of time and place’ (2003, 715). Commodification of things as varied as regional foods, dialects and customs, accompanied by often curated media stereotypes and tropes, blunts the edge of local perceived insularity and legitimises regional distinctions. The subsequently acceptable use of the regional offers a framework for negotiating away from the presentation of an imagined Anglo-Saxon monoculture whilst still being able to fully reference the period. Regionality is, however, still a largely staged production and has led to the promotion of a Northumbrian Christianity which is located more in modern Northumberland than in Teesside, Yorkshire, or on Humberside and largely appeals to contemporary ecological concerns rather than religious belief. It may be hypothesised that some of the ambiguities observed in English Heritage around the creation of the Cuthbert cenotaph emerge from the tensions between wishing to uphold a prominent individual viewed as of regional importance whilst being unable, or perhaps unwilling, to use either a highly unfashionable religious narrative nor an essentially staged and commodified (and historically questionable) ecological discourse.

## 2. Scottish Identity

Outside of England, the Anglian heritage of what is now Scotland appeared to be presented less favourably. The dynamic of populations in the northern British Isles during the early medieval period is complex, and even those people now known as the Scots can be viewed as colonisers and invaders (Fraser and Mason 2009; Evans 2019). Such considerations were, however, largely subsumed at Whithorn and the National Museum by a notion of Scotland as an entity without necessarily making it clear whether this was a geographical, cultural or ethnic construct. Often it seemed that visitors were presented with a country that predated not just the early middle ages but also the Roman period, yet one which held the same boundaries and qualities of the modern nation. At Whithorn and the National Museum, Anglian influences were presented as essentially alien:

Not all objects end up where they do as a result of peaceful contact. Territorial wars and periods of occupation also leave traces. During the 7th century AD, the Anglian rulers of Northumbria expanded their control into southern Scotland as far as the Firth of Forth, and Lothian was held until AD 973. Settlers brought domestic effects [20], coins [24], and jewellery [21-23] into Scotland. Relations between the Anglian rulers and their neighbours ranged from friendly to hostile: gifts were given and loot was taken (Panel, National Museum of Scotland)

Bede's *Historia* was precisely that, a history of the Church in England, stressing that it was a Roman foundation, differing from the Celtic church founded in Iona by St. Columba. Ninian, trained in the Roman church, was therefore of particular interest to Bede, as the bringer of Roman Christianity to Scotland well before Columba introduced the Celtic rite, eventually suppressed at the Synod of Whitby in 664. (Panel, The Whithorn Project)

When Northumbrians invaded southern Scotland in the 7th century AD they brought a different style of Christianity with them. This had more direct links back to the Mediterranean as the art style shows - one side of the cross shaft has a vine with grapes. The Northumbrian style of Christianity influenced their neighbours, the Picts. (Panel, National Museum of Scotland)

While the influence and subsequent adoption of the late Roman imagery of vines is widely accepted as a feature of Northumbrian worked stone (Hawkes 2003b, 275), the panel appears to consider their use purely as a decorative device. This somewhat sidesteps the possibility that vines could have held multivalent meanings for early medieval audiences (Thomas 2019), not least as a reference to the Christological claim of John 15.5 where Christ describes Himself as 'the Vine' (Lang 1988, 23). It may be that the interpretation coalesces around Mediterranean influence because of an anticipation of audience puzzlement over the use of the imagery of viticulture in the northern British Isles. However, in accentuating this Mediterranean inspiration, the alien nature of the Northumbrian is asserted. By locating the creation of the shaft within an act of invasion it carries the additional inference that other, perhaps somehow more authentic, styles and forms were subalterned. In a somewhat similar way, the description of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* as a 'history of the Church *in* England' (author's italic) on the panel at Whithorn serves to replace an ethnocentric work that is concerned with a 'people' with one that is defined by purely modern

geographical boundaries. At a stroke any relevance outside of these borders is dismissed. This othering of Englishness has been reported elsewhere in Scottish heritage contexts (e.g. Sim 2012; Timoney 2020, 432-433) where England and the English, and by implication early medieval Northumbrians and Northumbria, may be portrayed as colonialists in an unequal relationship which continues in various forms to the present day (McClellan and Cooke 2001, 149).

It is difficult not to conclude that these panels emerged in the context of politicised discourses concerned with Scottish identity and the overlaying of the modern Scottish state, not least geographically, on the early medieval past. Thus: 'modern national boundaries were superimposed on historical territories to create a direct link between these groups and historical antecedents' (Timoney 2020, 433). No attempt to define 'Scotland' or 'Scottish', nor indeed 'England' and 'English', was observed and the fluidity of borders, ethnicity and linguistic groupings went unremarked. That there were disputes and conflicts between Northumbria and its northern neighbours is clear but the connections and relationships that placed, for instance, Oswald on Iona, Aidan at Bamburgh and Cuthbert in Melrose went unexplored.

Whilst Scottish institutions appeared generally content in marshalling the (non-Anglian) early medieval in support of a national identity, nothing similar was observed at the four English case study sites where regionality dominated. A senior curator observed that Scottish institutions were unlikely to highlight regional distinctiveness but rather were inclined to accentuate a generalised Pictish inheritance because it supported a distinctive national meme:

Well, I think the mere existence of the Picts makes it different [from England] because that gives people something to hold on to, is defining you know, an independent identity ..., Scottish people regarded the Picts with a little bit of disgust almost, you know, as these tiny hole dwelling people a bit like hobbits I guess, only not as nice. But that discourse has probably changed in the 20th century really as that material has been more studied and... Scottish independence has started to kind of take off and keep[s] renewing itself. (A09 21:07)

Such observations act to support the assertion of critical heritage studies that the construction of identity through heritage is a politicised social process – it is deployed and curated, privileged and suppressed in support of governing discourses whilst remaining essentially subjective and intangible (Smith 2006, 53-54, Gentry and Smith 2019). They also act as a reminder that heritage institutions are, either consciously or unconsciously, complicit in this process. Overall, these observations serve to reinforce the axiom that interpretation does not arise in a vacuum. Yet, however, the degree of influence that heritage sites and organisations have in the creation of national identity, despite professional assertions, remains somewhat ambiguous. Visitors remain active agents in the creation of their own identity conferring narratives. As Fiona McClean and Steven Cooke reported after researching the impact of the, then newly opened, National Museum of Scotland:

...[this research] has highlighted how many of the visitors articulated ambivalence, both in the ability of the Museum to tell the story of Scotland, and the desirability of actually being told. In other words, for many of the visitors, the link between the Museum and the construction of their own sense of identity is not readily apparent. By commenting on the layout of the museum, the visitors seem to be arguing for a fluid relationship between themselves and the museum. The museum is still seen as a source of authority and whose assertive voice is looked for, but which is now subject to critique and renegotiation. The authorial voice should be present but should be decentred and non-prescriptive, allowing the visitors to negotiate between their own 'routes' and the 'routes' presented for them by the Museum. (McClean and Cooke 2001, 156-157)

It was notable, particularly regarding worked stone, that there was a significant and coordinated relationship between the statutory body, Historic Environment Scotland (and its predecessor Historic Scotland) with both the Scottish academy and the country's heritage organisations. This is attributed to the wealth of surviving sculpture combined with the pioneering influence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century of Augustus Pitt Rivers, the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments for the British Isles (Foster 2005, 2). The earliest policy document concerning worked stone produced by Historic Scotland was released in 1992 (2005, 2) which led to the formation of the National Committee on Carved Stones in Scotland (2005, 4). This group went on to act as a catalyst by providing a meeting space for representatives



from a wide variety of bodies concerned with archaeology, conservation and heritage together with key academics from a breadth of disciplines. Although all periods of carved stone were considered from the outset by Historic Scotland this process has led to the production of a variety of strategies located within the early medieval period. These include policy documents such as *Early Medieval Carved Stones in Historic Scotland's Care* (Foster et al 2003) as well as research into the social values of early medieval heritage (e.g. *Early Medieval Sculpture and the Production of Meaning, Value and Place*, Jones 2004). Although the rate of publication may have slowed from a highpoint in the early 2000s, A33, an academic with a significant profile within Scottish early medieval heritage studies, reported continued vitality in the field:

So, I think that actually the scholarly current, and early mediaeval current in Scotland has been very dynamic for decades, and dynamic in [a] very interdisciplinary [way] with lots of people talking to each other. There's been massive developments in our understanding of the early mediaeval period in Scotland, full stop. Whether that's coming from historical historians or placement scholars, or archaeologists or art historians, who by the way, mostly talk to each other, and so that kind of all comes together and there's been a lot of really good and exciting developments. (A33 09:16)

It became apparent during the first phase of interviews that aside from the inheritances that had been received, a key factor in the Scottish approach was the apparently accidental coming together of several specialists within Historic Scotland. Together they realised both the importance of the body of Scottish sculpture and developed a shared vision for its potential in the nation's heritage discourse:

So, there's a long tradition of national agencies getting together to talk about carved stones, and why they're important and what can be done with them. And a lot of that has focused on around the early mediaeval because in Scotland we have a long tradition of lots of research on the early mediaeval, as you well know. But I think then something else happened within HES, which is that we, there was a body all of us, including me, who were particularly interested in carved stones, and recognised the potential to do a lot more with our own estate in relation to carved stones. (A33 09:16)

The fruition of this process is evident at several Scottish sites, not least the Historic Environment Scotland Priory Museum at Whithorn where clear interpretative principles had been first established and then applied. The accessibility of these policies, together with their surrounding discourses, was also notable and stands in some contrast to organisations elsewhere. There did not appear to be an equivalent synchronised focus on heritage and interpretational issues in England, perhaps because of a larger and more diverse cohort of researchers and professionals, although Rosemary Cramp's drive in the instigation of the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* (Cramp 1984) demonstrates the recognition of the utility of an accessible and comprehensive survey, albeit one located in materiality. The absence of a Scottish equivalent of the *Corpus* has been noted as a source of some regret, not least as a place to accessibly gather new research and discoveries (Higgitt 2005).

### **3. Identity Lost**

A theme that arose in interviews at Durham and Lindisfarne was the absence of the Lindisfarne Gospels, currently housed in the British Library in London although originally part of the assemblage associated with shrine and cult of St Cuthbert (Verey 1989, 152-155; Brown 2003b.; Jackson 2022, 20-25). That the Gospels were no longer located in the region occasioned the expression of something akin to a sense of bereavement accompanied by a claim of the lessening of interpretative meaning and diminished identity across the North East:

The thing about Lindisfarne is that all the best bits of Lindisfarne are somewhere else. [The] Gospels in London, because they're, you know, and it's fine, they can have it but you know, all the best bits have been picked and taken away. (B09 21:56)

And their separation is a fact but also an unfortunate accident of history. And, to put it very crudely, the cathedral didn't look after its treasures sufficiently carefully. It was, it lost it and they shouldn't have done but we are where we are so we never pressed very strongly ... we didn't pursue the rhetoric of the Gospel book should be returned to the northeast, it belongs here. We didn't follow that line on the grounds that it just

it's such a, it's such a contested matter that there was no point in getting embroiled in controversy, akin to the Parthenon Marbles, where it wasn't going to do us any good. It was it was an unwinnable argument, so we didn't see the point of pursuing it. (B21 29:34)

The other impetus as well is one of the selling points of Lindisfarne Priory is this is the place where the Lindisfarne Gospels were produced. Now we've got two problems with that. One that we've got a mediaeval priory, not an Anglo-Saxon monastery on view, which is what we just said [and] the other we haven't got the Lindisfarne Gospels. Neither have we got a replica of them, which they've got around the corner in the village. And we didn't want to tread on toes there. But there's an expectation from visitors that they come to Lindisfarne priory to learn something about the Lindisfarne Gospels. (B16 12:28)

Despite the observations of absence, the Gospels have, however, been exhibited in the region on five occasions over the last three decades. The British Library guide to the Gospels describes how they were 'loaned for display in Durham in 1987 and 2013, and in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1996, 2000 and 2022' (Jackson 2022, 86). The perhaps unfortunate use of the almost throw away concept of 'loan', which asserts a metropolitan-located title, resonates with research elsewhere which has described heightened localised perceptions over what is perceived as the loss of artefacts to national institutions compounded by subsequent rejections of local claims of ownership. Siân Jones (2004) charts the charged relationship between various heritage agencies and the local community over the placing of the two segments of the Pictish Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab in the National Museum of Scotland. Although the biography of the slab is complex, local claims of ownership were dismissed in favour of those of national institutions and various requests for its return were rebuffed. Overall, Jones concludes that heritage practices and policies that define significance, and thus direct management, need to be adjusted to better value local meanings within the communities which they create and maintain. In this there needs to be a recognition that potentially very different ownership discourses need to be negotiated (2004, 66-67). This question of ownership also emerged following the discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard. The desire to prevent the Hoard's purchase by metropolitan museums and keep it in Stoke-on-Trent, despite the city's somewhat tenuous claims over the assemblage, is credited as a driving the successful local fundraising campaign in an area of social and economic deprivation (Capper and Scully 2015).

The importance of the Lindisfarne Gospels for Durham and on Lindisfarne was reported to have led to several strategies to mitigate for its absence. B07 (7:36) described how part of the rationale for the redevelopment of the cathedral museum into its present form had been to create a space where the Gospels might be displayed during their 2013 exhibition in Durham. Ultimately, the exhibition was housed in Durham University's Palace Green Library, adjacent to the cathedral (British Museum 2013) although the intent remained. At Lindisfarne Priory, the interpretative scheme had sought to use the collection of name stones to locate the Gospel's narrative on the island:

What these stones enabled us to do is make a direct connection to that community to probably the scribe that has produced those gospels and talk about the fusion of skills of influences east and west, and insular development of art, the use of script, it was the closest we're going to get to the Gospels. And the fact that we have those they're real and unique, again, meant it was really important to use the stones. (B16 12:28).

What remains uncertain in this discussion is, however, in a return to the question as to the degree to which perceptions of identity arise from a deep-seated public empathy for the places, people and artefacts of the 'Golden Age' or whether they are more expressions of professional preoccupations which are transferred onto the region. In an age where digital access to high-definition images of artefacts is straightforward (e.g. British Library 2022) and secular worldviews often dismiss the religious, it is unclear to what degree it can be claimed that the absence of the Gospels from the North East impacts upon concepts of identity and ownership. These unanswered questions suggest further avenues of research.

## **c. Religious and Spiritual Identities**

### **1. The Relics of St Cuthbert – Identity Given and Received**

A number of the artefacts removed by 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquarians from Cuthbert's Durham Cathedral tomb are currently housed in the former monastic Great Kitchen, a significant feature of the well-preserved claustral ranges of the medieval monastery. Although a variety of other artefacts are exhibited, the central displays concern those items recovered from Cuthbert's tomb. The fragments of the 7<sup>th</sup> century coffin are supported on a frame within a case which allows the viewer walk around and reconstruct it as a whole (Figure 7.1). Inasmuch as the fragments will allow the coffin is recreated and the interpretation is supported by a 'Pepper's Ghost' display which considers individual elements of the carved decoration. Unfortunately, this was not fully working during the period of site visits and so only a partial appreciation of this element of the interpretative scheme could be gained. The most complete examples of the 10<sup>th</sup> century textiles, the stole, maniple and girdle - the full collection is not displayed - are presented in their vertical case horizontally (Figure 7.2) and although they can be viewed from both sides this does not encourage the viewer to appreciate how they might have been worn. The comb and the two fragments of the portable altar stand in a glass case at eye height (Figure 6.3) adjacent to the case which contains the pectoral cross (Figure 7.3) which floats alone almost ethereally above its label.



Figure 7.1. St Cuthbert's Coffin, Durham Open Treasure. Ian Colson.



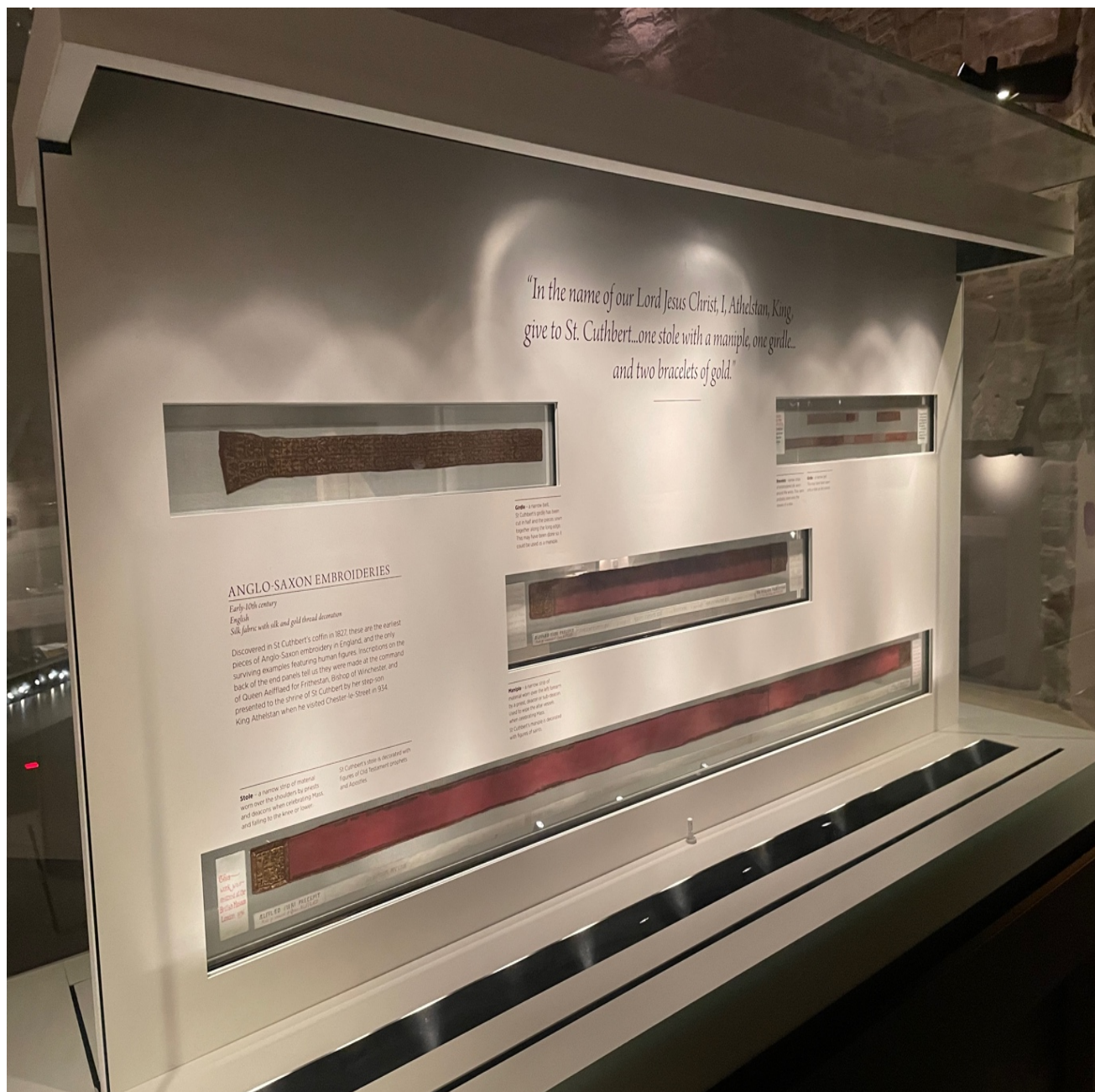


Figure 7.2. Vestments from St Cuthbert's Coffin, Durham Open Treasure. Ian Colson.



Figure 7.3. St Cuthbert's Pectoral Cross., Durham Open Treasure. Ian Colson.



The Great Kitchen is bell-shaped, perhaps fifteen meters in diameter, with a tall arched roof sufficient to give a feeling of space and airiness. The visitor enters by what feels to be a slightly contorted route. This involves moving down staircases (or using a lift) and along corridors away from the other exhibition spaces in the former monastic dormitory. This means passing from the tall windows of the dormitory which flood in natural light into windowless spaces which are artificially lit. The effect, for this researcher at least, is slightly disorientating and, while passing along it, it is difficult to understand how this route relates to the layout of the extant claustral buildings as there are few points of reference. Eventually the visitor reaches a closed door which must be opened by the pressing of a switch and this allows entry to the Great Kitchen itself.

Entering this space the visitor is met by a combination of gothic architecture, the acoustic created by the Kitchen's shape and the dimmed lighting of both the space itself and the individual cases. The cumulative affective response is one entering a place which feels church or chapel-like and which shares some of the physical characteristics of a stereotypical western, Christian, sacred space. Visitors' behaviour was observed to change as they entered, adopting more hushed tones. This was noted by professionals too: 'they'll be talking at normal volumes. The moment they enter that space, you hear their voices dropping' (A08 50:43). However, this did not necessarily appear to be a response to the artefacts themselves which are not immediately in line of sight at the entrance. Unlike other areas of the exhibition space, a member of staff was prominently positioned in the Kitchen and was observed greeting visitors as they entered. This combination of environment and greeting may have had the effect of changing behaviours and, through casual observation, some visitors initially appeared not to be sure how to respond to the space, perhaps uncertain whether the Kitchen formed an adjunct of the sacred precincts of the cathedral which they presumably felt required them to respond in a specific way.

A deconstruction of this sense of sacrality, however, suggests a complex of factors coming together to create this effect. Professionals were careful to point out that the sense of place was not staged, that conservation and display considerations were paramount and thus any resultant 'atmosphere' was secondary (B03 57:37). Terry I Kinder (2012), while recognising that overarching definitions are elusive, suggests that sacred places are those 'that inspire particular awe or protection – or are charged with the memory of an event linked to a belief'

(2012, 207). However, she goes on to observe that in increasingly secular societies, political, historical, and cultural significance may come to replace associations with the divine which leads to the suggestion that what may on observation appear to be some form of spiritual response, brought about by the observer's own preoccupations, may be something else entirely. The reaction of visitors at Durham suggests that there may be a third element in this in that various features may combine to trigger an affective response, observed elsewhere to be irrespective of religious belief (De Dijn 2012, 46-47). Through the presence of symbols and tropes which are presented elsewhere in society, in lighting and architecture for example, visitors are presented with the special, solemn or sacred that reference discourses which in turn are understood to demand or elicit certain responses. While research around visitor engagement and emotion has, for instance, demonstrated affective responses to tropes in country houses (Smith 2021, 237-239), the sources of visitor response to the performance of religious interpretations remain uncertain. A further consideration at Durham is the presence of artefacts inside the Kitchen which may not be seen as having a sacred meaning. Whether these objects have any impact on the agency of the collection from Cuthbert's tomb through the modification of any perception of sacred space or behavioural response is unknown. It may be that their presence serves to dilute perceptions of Cuthbert's artefacts as forming a distinct assemblage. Even if such an impression is gained, the visitor must closely read the various case labels to appreciate that, while brought together around the person of Cuthbert, these objects emerge from centuries long processes of deposition and dispersal. In all of this, the relationship between the artefacts in the Great Kitchen and Cuthbert's burial place in the Feretory remain undefined and open to negotiation, engendering perhaps a sense of incompleteness for those who might look for a single unifying narrative or meaning.

Of all the artefacts held in the cathedral it is perhaps the pectoral cross which has the widest social significance. The image of the cross is used across the City and County of Durham as a ubiquitous symbol by a variety of organisations ranging from the University of Durham to the county's police force. Whilst a widely used, and often stylised, image it remains uncertain to what degree its origin is widely appreciated or understood. Amongst those involved in its care and interpretation there was, however, a strong conviction of its centrality in the creation of local identity. This emerged amongst the three phase two interviewees concerned with the exhibition at Durham who responded defensively in interview when questions about Cuthbert's use and ownership of the cross were introduced. Even when conceding that the

cross may have been a *postmortem* deposition, a connection with Cuthbert was defended which transcended its materiality:

So, for example, the Cuthbert cross, and the beautiful garnet and gold, much smaller cross and found at Trumpington. And that's part of the crisis is that the similar designs are smaller, significantly smaller than the Cuthbert one. So that raises an interesting question if found on female figures. I think if you pushed me, intellectually and academically, I think I would be beginning to say, it was almost certainly not the cross that would have been worn on a daily basis by a hermit bishop in an austere community.... So, and it's grandeur is such that I cannot see one who has adopted a simplicity of life, going for that degree of expenditure. So, we're starting to look into a form of gift. So, I think it is deeply intimate and deeply personal. ....I think what is quite powerful is over the period of time, it sank into the breast bone. And so, in terms of reliquary, and in terms of missional engagement with it, I put this to the now Bishop of Blackburn called Philip North who was ordained here, I said, the cross actually went into the breastbone of the saint. If ever there was a description of what a holy life is mainly the cross, and the bone nearest to your heart becomes one, this is it. And his phrase was, 'well, that'll preach'. And for me, that is quite a powerful statement. (B07 20:56).

Respondents reported that a central consideration behind the development of the current exhibition at Durham was to enhance local heritage. Two audiences were understood as driving a unified interpretative process:

Well, I think there were two target audiences. One was the audience of local people, North Eastern people to help them understand their own heritage better their own Christian heritage better. The other was visitors from further afield. And I don't know that we clearly distinguish between the two because we believed that if we were to interpret the heritage intelligently then the same story would resonate in both those audiences, but they, they were the key ones, I think. (B21 12:13)

All three of the Durham interviewees located the endeavour of the Open Treasure exhibition in the mission of the Cathedral. That mission was variously articulated but was primarily a religious concern, expressed on several occasions as the desire to facilitate a personal spiritual encounter, in which Cuthbert held a central, yet cautious, place:

The question would be about other dynamics of religious faith ... are we doing something similar to enable people to have an encounter and understanding and engagement with who Jesus Christ is? Because fundamentally, yes, we are a community in the location gathered around Cuthbert, but we gathered around Cuthbert gathering around the person of Jesus Christ. I'm not sure we terribly err.. we always communicate that very well. I'm not sure that the cathedral's title, which is the Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary, the Virgin, and then more recently added on to that Cuthbert of Durham [Cuthbert was removed from the dedication of the Cathedral during the Reformation and was reinstated in 2005 (BBC 2005)]. A place of course, which he only ever came to, after death because it didn't exist? I'm not sure we necessarily, are there properly in our engagement with that. (B07 1:01:15).

As described in Chapter Three, the Church of England has a somewhat ambiguous relationship with the concept of sainthood and lacks any formal process by which an individual may be formally canonised, though people may memorialised by inclusion in the Church's calendar (Archbishops' Council 2000). Although the inheritor of many aspects of medieval Catholicism, Anglican polity as expressed in Article XXII of the Articles of Religion in the final 1662 version of the *Book of Common Prayer* prohibits the invocation of saints and the veneration of relics. Regardless, some saints' days were maintained at the Reformation, and these have gradually been added to, most prolifically over the late 20<sup>th</sup> century leading to the current Church of England calendar. Here, Cuthbert (20 March or 4 September), Bede (25 April), Oswald (5 August), Aidan (31 August), Wilfred (12 October) and Hild (19 November) are commemorated alongside a variety of other early medieval figures. Authorised Anglican liturgy is careful, however, to differentiate between the commemoration of individuals and their invocation though in practice this varies considerably across individual dioceses and parishes and the re-emergence of the invocation of saints in parts of the Church of England was a distinctive feature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century catholic revival. Such variations contrast with the Catholic tradition where relics have consistently formed an acknowledged element of 'popular piety' (Catholic Church 1999, 374) and where requests for saintly intercession remains encouraged (1999, 571). Similarly in the Orthodox family of traditions, the place of saints and relics is well-developed and 'springs from a highly developed theology of the body' (Ware 1997, 234).

At Durham Cathedral, although the Church of England's reticence over relics was clearly expressed, doctrinal precision was somewhat softened by more affected responses to the artefacts associated with Cuthbert:

These inspire that kind of response in me. When I saw those relics, I mean, the cross the altar, the vestments, the comb, there's something wondrous about that. I think the way that they are displayed with very clever lighting, I think, brings that out. I don't you know, it's not just smoke and mirrors, is it there's something? There is something there's something marvellous about it, something that radiates from it, to me, but then, you know, pilgrimage, is as much about what we bring to a place to a shrine, to an idea, to a memory as what we find when we get there (B21 41:33).

This understanding appeared to have led to a sympathetic appreciation of the potential of a faith-led gaze and performance by visitors engaging with the interpretations in the Great Kitchen. This had led to specific design decisions:

We are very aware that to a proportion of our visitors, a significant proportion, these are holy relics. And some visitors may want to venerate them, they may want to spend a moment in prayer or meditation. So, the lighting in that space is already quite low. And that's partly to preserve the textiles that are on display. They're very light sensitive. But it's also partly to try to make that space more of a sanctuary more meditative. (B03 50:43)

This anticipation of a distinctly spiritual response to the relics had also impacted on the form of interpretation and acted to inform the way in which visitors were expected to behave in the space:

We made a very conscious decision that any interpretation in there would not have an audio element, it will be visual, only. It's also the only space within the museum where we do not allow photography, partly because given the low light levels, people will use flash and that's damaging. But also, because if people are wanting to pray or reflect, we don't want folks sticking a camera in their face. It would be very intrusive. And it would also be potentially an invasion of their privacy. (A08 50:43)

Overall, it was difficult, however, to see quite how the arrangement of the display in the Great Kitchen might facilitate prayer and reflection. Other than the ambience created by the architecture of the Kitchen itself, there was little to suggest that this was anything other than a modern exhibition space designed to enable a visual interrogation of the objects on display accompanied by low light levels that were informed by good conservation practice. There did not appear to be any encouragement of spiritual or religious performance and so, for instance, the seating that was available appeared to be for the benefit of the member of staff on duty in the room and what standing, or even kneeling, room was around the cases was part of the general audience flow through the Kitchen's space. There was no sense that the visitor could do much more than simply move from one case to another nor that the curated gaze included the spiritual rather than being purely material; spiritual responses were elicited by the accidents of environment. In this respect the responses of A08 and others at Durham invite further reflection. It may be that institutional priorities have shifted since the inception of the Kitchen to include such responses and that the design intent has been appropriated to accommodate these perspectives. Certainly, a privileging of devotional responses to the Cuthbert artefacts would be unsurprising in the context of a cathedral as a living place of worship. Equally, it may suggest that a faith-led interpretative philosophy had been subalterned by other concerns and that those interviewed had been unable to fashion the outcome. This may be supported by the lingering suggestion at Durham that the relationship between designers and curatorial professionals could be difficult and ultimately one sided.

Amongst the case study sites, the exhibition at Durham is unique in that it displays objects which can be directly linked with the corporeal remains of a local saint, with the open possibility that some might have been used by, or familiar to, Cuthbert during his lifetime. While other sites might be linked to an individual these were more generalised attachments which primarily concerned place and, except for Jarrow Hall, none could be described as holding relics in the sense that an object could act as a focus for religious performance. At Jarrow Hall, somewhat incongruously, a reliquary is displayed in what had been designed as a temporary exhibition strong room (Figure 7.4). The contents of the gilt casket include several primary relics, that is fragments of human remains, together with a variety of other secondary relics, objects used by those commemorated or which had been near their remains, all of which have been authenticated by the Catholic Church. None of the those

commemorated had a direct connection with Jarrow. The reliquary was gifted in 2018 by the municipality of Abbadia San Salvatore near Sienna in recognition of the civic twinning of the two towns. The twinning itself came about through the biographies of the *Codex Amiatinus* and its replica and the interpretation at Jarrow Hall includes a translation of the letter accompanying the gifting of the reliquary which refers to a shared religious heritage. The degree to which the community of Jarrow uses this heritage to maintain its identity is an open question. It seems uncertain, however, that a reciprocal gift to Abbadia San Salvatore would be of a religious nature.



Figure 7.4. Abbadia Reliquary at Jarrow Hall, April 2023. Ian Colson.

That the reliquary could exert a religious agency was an outcome apparently unconsidered by the professionals involved at Jarrow Hall:

But it was reported to me and a few months ago, that actually there was a group that came in, and interestingly enough, they stopped, and they actually went to pray at the reliquary which isn't something that we actually ever really anticipated or thought about. (A07 09:22)

While only limited conclusions can be drawn from this, it would tend to support a hypothesis that discourses within the organisation concerning the reliquary were centred around the material and aesthetic rather than the spiritual or religious.

Elsewhere, groups and individuals who engaged in overt spiritual performances were certainly welcomed but not necessarily afforded any benefits over or above other visitors. Perhaps somewhat tongue in cheek, B09 observed described how at the Lindisfarne Priory visitor centre they had:

... walked in there and people, whole groups of people, (were) praying in the visitor centre. A bloody nuisance really, but for whatever reason they've trekked across to the island, walked across the sands however they've got there. Well, they've got there by bike, by foot, by car, by taxi - they've got there. They were going there for a reason, that's up to them, you know, and it was great. (B09 19:03)

The relationship between religious worship in the context of heritage sites and the display of artefacts is an active area of research interest, although in the West the organisationally encouraged practice of prayer and devotion in public heritage institutions is largely located in non-Christian traditions (Paine 2013, 39). Sponsored religious activities are frequently seen as an appropriate institutional response when faith groups assert some form of ownership over objects, not least as heritage bodies respond to the need to de-colonise collections and interpretations (e.g Nooter Roberts et al 2017; O'Neill 2017). Organisations are cautious,



however, in the relinquishing of control over any religious activities that take place within them frequently appealing to a perceived need to uphold a secular ethos, a perspective with which even religious visitors may agree (Nightingale and Greene 2010; Berns 2017, 88). Nonetheless, faith-based responses to artefacts continue to be reported and observed (e.g. Berns 2015 and 2017 and as reported at Jarrow) when religious items are exhibited although specifically Christian engagement appears largely understudied, perhaps because of a dominance of aesthetic interpretation of Christian artefacts. Although the secular display of objects considered sacred may be considered to be inappropriate by some believers, perhaps perversely, the process of making artefacts necessarily visible in the context of an exhibition or display, as against hidden and protected elsewhere, can allow for a more meaningful devotional interaction (Berns 2017, 165). Steph Bern's research centred on the 2011 British Museum exhibition *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (Berns 2017) and concluded that Christian visitors bring, and leave, 'devotional baggage', that is pre-existing ritual practices which are informed by established religious traditions. Whilst curators may choose what objects may be exhibited and how they may be interpreted, visitors will subvert meanings which do not accord with these traditions and devotional performances may move outside of areas of professional expertise and expectation. There was some sense of this at Durham where during interview, the researcher mentioned a series of YouTube videos recording a pilgrimage by an Orthodox group to the cathedral which had referenced the veneration of Cuthbert's relics (Orthodox Britain, undated). As veneration stands largely outside of Anglican practice, the response suggested that the institution was content to re-frame such actions within its own understanding, authorising and re-interpreting ritual performances as acts of pilgrimage:

(Researcher: Did you anticipate that [the relics] would be a source of veneration?)

So, I mean, I don't think we use that word particularly, I think we hoped it would be to draw pilgrims, we certainly wanted to draw pilgrims. So, when you asked who the audience was, that talked about visitors, I included in that those who came to Durham, for reasons that we would call pilgrimage. And yes, veneration why not? I think in that way, the Great Kitchen as a quasi-sacred space, fulfils the idea of a goal of such a pilgrimage. (B21 41:33)

As a discrete case study, the Cuthbert relics act to show the intersection of several identities. These can look to the artefacts to confer meaning whilst at the same time awarding meaning back to them. Overall, the cathedral authorities appear to act to authorise the discourse around the objects through an expression of Anglican theology and in this tread a fine line in resisting overt identification as sacred relics whilst at the same time contesting purely cultural or aesthetic meanings. Subversion happens, however, when constructions are created which are not aligned to this understanding and individuals and communities generate their own discourses. This ranges from other non-Anglican Christian groups, the exemplar of which is evidenced in the report of Orthodox veneration, to those visitors whose capitals do not necessarily equip them to respond to the space as they enter the Kitchen and who are left in some uncertainty. A significant loss in the research here, however, was the inability to interrogate the design intentions held by the professional design team and the degree to which the purpose of the plan for the Kitchen exhibition space was understood in terms of an authorising Anglican-centric dialogue or whether other discourses were privileged. In this context, it would not seem to be unreasonable to suggest that if the display in the Great Kitchen was removed from the context of the cathedral it would not look dissimilar to exhibition designs in any number of secular institutions where issues of conservation and the accessibility of objects for audience engagement sit at the fore. This is suggestive of these concerns being the prime design drivers and not those which might emerge from questions of identity and purpose, not least those concerned with religious meanings. In many ways, this is unsurprising as the primacy of the preservation of objects would seem to be axiomatic, but it also suggests that there are other, hidden, discourses which act to drive design decisions.

Durham Open Treasure provides an intriguing opportunity for deeper study in that it offers an example where an interpretative scheme has emerged from a distinct and well-defined organisational identity with the suspicion of multiple conflicts and contestations. The fact that the meaning of such high-profile objects can be claimed by a religious body is in many ways counter to a prevailing secular heritage culture dominated by concerns around the aesthetic. It thus serves to offer a significant contrast which may be used to develop theorisation elsewhere. In many other places this defining identity is opaquer despite a plethora of mission statements, published strategies and annual reports.

## 2. Pilgrimage and Identity

Aside from the National Museum of Scotland, all the case study sites had long associations with pilgrimage. From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Durham and Whithorn re-emerged as major sites of medieval pilgrimage centred respectively around the cults of Cuthbert and Ninian (Tudor 1989; Brooke 1994), and following the translation of Cuthbert's body, Lindisfarne was developed as an extension of the shrine at Durham (Piper 1989). In a similar way, pilgrims returned as monastic life was renewed at Jarrow and Whitby through their associations to Bede and Hild (Butler and Given-Wilson 1979). While the Reformation brought about the demise of pilgrimage in both England and Scotland during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, a gradual Victorian reemergence was sparked by an increasingly confident Catholicism and the growth of a catholic wing within Anglicanism. As English and Scottish Protestant hegemonies were gradually dismantled more overt religious performances could take place in public view resulting in events such as the re-establishment of formalised Catholic pilgrimages to Whithorn in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Proctor and Gillick 2019). Modern pilgrimage remains a growing phenomenon and in turn continues to be a source of ongoing scholarly investigation and theorisation (Coleman 2002; Di Giovine 2011; Miles-Watson 2022). A subtle shift, however, has been away from participants' emphasis on the final destination to values connected with the journey itself (Bailey 2023). Contemporary pilgrims seem increasingly unlikely to pursue the same religious aims as their medieval predecessors and motivations brought about by structured belief systems are being replaced by less defined, and more individual, spiritualities (Sørensen and Høgh-Olesen 2023) which may themselves contain no faith propositions (Roszak 2022). Several scholars point to the 'eventization' of pilgrimage (e.g. Pfadenhauer 2010; Dowson 2020) which may be broadly understood as the identification of elements of modern marketing strategies within religious settings. This suggests a certain degree of commodification which in turn raises questions around both experienced and interpreted authenticities (Dowson 2020) and the mechanisms by which these support personal, spiritual and religious identities. However, other scholars suggest that questions of motivation and authenticity may be bracketed and placed to one side in favour of the observation of wider flows and trends: 'moving to explore the relations at the level of overall ecology, however, allows us to see patterns in the flows of engagement without needing to go deeper than an awareness of the contestations of identity that are

playing out inside the complex of relations’ (Miles-Watson 2022, 416). In the context of this research it is, perhaps, sufficient to acknowledge the emerging complexity of these questions.

Respondents at Lindisfarne and Whithorn reported formalised pilgrimages, understood here as those including organised acts of worship, whereas this was a less clear feature at Whitby and Jarrow. At Durham the hope was expressed that the cathedral could further develop its work with pilgrims, not least at the tombs of Cuthbert and Bede. Overall, pilgrim motivations were acknowledged by participants as complex and mixed. A significant recent development, introduced by several interviewees, had been the creation of long- distance walking routes, variously described as ‘ways’ or ‘trails’, which have capitalised on early medieval religious heritage and later pilgrimage praxis. Support by local authorities reinforces their role in the tourist economy and regional regeneration. Several of routes relate to case study sites:

	Date of Inception	From	To	Organising/ Sponsoring Body	Distance (miles)
<b>St Cuthbert’s Way</b>	1996	Melrose	Lindisfarne	Scottish Borders Council, Northumberland County Council, Northumberland National Park.  (Scottish Borders Council 2011)	62
<b>St Oswald’s Way</b>	2005/6	Heavenfield	Lindisfarne	Alnwick Council.  (BBC 2005)	97
<b>The Whithorn Way (St Ninian’s Way)</b>	2013	Glasgow  (Carlisle)	Whithorn  (St Andrews)	Scottish Government, Historic Environment Scotland, Visit Scotland, The Whithorn Trust.  (Bold 2018; British Pilgrimage Trust undated))	143  (250)

<b>Northern Saints Trails</b>	2020			Visit County Durham, Durham County Council, Diocese of Durham, Durham Cathedral.  (Visit County Durham 2020)	
The Way of Life		Gainford	Durham		29
The Way of Learning		Jarrow/ Sunderland	Durham		38
The Angel's Way		Seaton Sluice	Chester-le-Street		30
The Way of Love		Hartlepool	Durham		28
The Way of Light		Heavenfield/ Hexham	Durham		45

Table 7.1 Modern pilgrimage paths relating to case study sites.

The established St Cuthbert's, St Oswald's and Whithorn paths are supported by several independently published guides and websites (e.g. Low 2019) whereas the more recent Northern Saints Trails are sustained by a paid for visitor guide, which compiles a series of free leaflets, and a website produced by the Durham County Council tourism body (Visit County Durham 2020). All the routes utilise pre-existing footpath and byways and to varying degrees have distinctive signage. Much of the literature around these pathways supports the notion that they have been 'eventized' (Pfadenhauer 2010), although not necessarily in ways that stimulate reflection upon belief or spirituality but rather in the promotion of local economies and wider heritage tourism. The guide for the Northern Saints Trails (Visit County Durham 2020), for example, while including a wide variety of early medieval related sites that lie both on and nearby the marked pathways also contains information on other more general heritage and tourist attractions such as museums, castles and areas of outstanding natural beauty within its main text.

The supporting published interpretation for the various pathways overwhelmingly adopts traditional and hagiographic narratives. As the trails themselves are largely based on these sources, not least the traditional peregrination of Cuthbert's coffin across the North, this is perhaps unsurprising. The 2020 series of guides from the Northern Saints Trails (Visit County Durham 2020) do, however offer developed descriptions of the materiality of the early medieval Church. At Jarrow, for example, the influence of *romanitas* in Biscop's monastic buildings is described and Anglian society explicitly placed within a broader continental framework through reference to trade and Gaulish glassmaking (Visit County Durham 2020, 16). However, there is little development of the beliefs and practices of early medieval Christians including the saints who form an essential part of the trails' narratives. Wider Christian narratives also appear sometimes confused. For example, the claim that 'The Way of Love follows the influence of three of the most important female figures in the establishment of Christianity in England – St Hilda, St Helena and St Mary Magdalene' (Visit County Durham 2020, 30) is somewhat curious and appears to come about because of the trail starting at the site of Hild's monastery at Hartlepool and subsequently passing through Kelloe, where 'a stone cross depicting Christianity's original ambassador St Helena... was built into a church' (2020, 30), and Hart where the parish church is dedicated to St Mary Magdalene (2020, 34). To what degree any of these three figures could be described as having an 'important' role in the establishment of Christianity in England is uncertain and their inclusion appears more a case of opportunism than a response to a historical narrative. Issues such as these combine to suggest a more developed focus on the material and touristically pragmatic rather than Christian history and lived religious experience within these guides. Quite what the uptake of the trails has been and how they are used remains uncertain with little, if any, analysis being openly published. It is perhaps indicative that this researcher was given a free copy, from a rather large pile, of the chargeable compendium of free guides at one site, the inference being that they were not being bought and so were now given away free. However, such cynicism needs to be balanced against accounts from those who use the trails and their descriptions of the benefits and encounters it has brought them (Miles-Watson 2020).

It would be wrong to suggest that commercialisation, and perhaps tenuous connections, invalidate the experience of pilgrimage. In reflecting on her own journey along the St

Cuthbert's way to Lindisfarne, Carole Cusack notes that while the 'trail provides the walker with both real and manufactured encounters with the saint' (2017,12) this does not necessarily mean that it is inauthentic. She suggests that the act of pilgrimage to Lindisfarne is in fact a quest for a relationship with the constructed authenticity of the early medieval past by people who have come to view their own participation in a post-industrial economy as essentially inauthentic, not least because leisure itself has been sacralised:

This discourse dovetails with the marketing of leisure as sacred in contemporary society; leisure is defined in opposition to the alienation of work in a post-industrial economy. This identification results in the mutual imbrication of tourism and religion/spirituality, and encourages pilgrims, tourists, and travellers to understand their embodied journeying through both the landscape and the built environment as a spiritual – or at least an identity conferring – process. (Cusack 2017, 18)

If such a view may be considered correct, the implications for heritage organisations are far reaching, especially in the form and manner of any interpretation that is offered. The concerns of curators, archaeologists and interpreters around materiality are shown to be displaced by questions of identity and the development of self. At a stroke this subverts Tilden's pragmatic philosophy which holds protection and conservation as the ultimate interpretative goal (2007, 140) and invites questions around how helpful constructivist approaches might be in what would appear to be in a singularly internalised quest. It may be that professionals may have to accept that the personal investment in modern pilgrimage is so deep that, to paraphrase Berns (2017), the devotional, spiritual and intellectual baggage brought by pilgrims requires an approach that supports these pre-existent monologues rather than having a predetermined institutional message to convey through interpretative schemes (Ham 2013, 20; Veverka 2016, 55-56). Ultimately, it is the individual who will construct meaning based on the totality of the experience through a dialogue between that which they bring and that which they encounter:

The secularised environment of the contemporary West situates the project of the self at the core of post-Christian spiritual practices. Walking in the silent and largely deserted landscape of Northumbria and the Scottish Borders, while immersed in the life and activities of the Anglo-Saxon Saint Cuthbert, affords at the very least a four

or five day restorative absence from the present, and, in the case of those (such as myself) with deep knowledge of the historical sources and the archaeological record, the possibility to.... 'meet' Anglo-Saxon England, if not on its own terms, then at least on terms that are not my own, which is a rare and precious experience. (Cusack 2017, 18-19)

This does not obviate the need for interpretation, after all the body of visitors and pilgrims is widely mixed in terms of expectation, motivation and pre-existent knowledge. Rather, it invites a spread of approaches where people can engage in different ways, and an understanding of interpretation as more of a process than a finished product where both professional and visitor cooperate in the creation of, potentially very personalised, meaning.

#### **d. Chapter Conclusions**

The aim of this chapter has been to consider the intersection of questions of identity with the heritage constructions around early medieval religious faith and practice. What has emerged are clear professional convictions of the agency of the period in the maintenance of senses of place, connection, and belonging. A place for Christianity in this is certain because the history and materiality of the early medieval are themselves so overwhelmingly Christian-centric. However, it may well be that faith, both that of the past and the present, is largely incidental in these processes as it are conceptualisations of antiquity that award meaning.

It has been suggested that the observed interpretative discourses in Scotland can be seen to be located in questions of independence and national identity whereas in England these are concerned with the regional or even more locally focused. In both Scotland and England, selective narratives are marshalled to provide support for the privileging of interpretations to bolster specific discourses. The hazy concept of Celtic Christianity is frequently employed, and this has the effect of accentuating, or even inventing, aspects of early medieval belief that are subsequently deployed in support of more contemporary concerns.



The artefacts associated with the Shrine of St Cuthbert in Durham offer some unique perspectives, not least because they sit within an avowedly faith-based institution. While on one hand Anglican polity attempts to exert some control over their meaning, and thus assert an institutional identity, other discourses are clearly present. Amongst these are the pragmatic needs of display and preservation and the contesting perceptions of other religious groups and individuals. Identity is created regardless of the authorising discourse which itself appears tolerant of the process. Largely hidden, however, are the constructions of those visitors who, as they enter the space of the Great Kitchen, are unsure how to respond and in that moment of dissonance create meanings that are entirely self-referential and opaque to the observer. Whether these responses are specific to the multiple meanings held in the Great Kitchen is unknown and an indication of future avenues for research. Elsewhere, institutions appear to juggle the multivalence of meaning that religious objects might carry and the role that this has in faith identities. This appears intrinsically connected with the dominance of artistic and aesthetic ideations around the artefacts and places in their care.

It is in the phenomena of modern pilgrimage that the future directions of identity creation may perhaps be most accurately observed. The trails and ways associated with the case study sites demonstrate various levels of staging, not least in the appropriation and manipulation of local and religious identities in support of economic development. This does not necessarily imply any loss of agency on the part of the modern pilgrim; indeed, the weight of evidence suggests that religious motivations are declining to be replaced with more individualised intent – it is the journey, not the destination, that matters. This has profound implications for heritage organisations and places in that it confirms those museological insights which demand that interpretation be a shared process. Thus, it is through relationship rather than transaction that meaning is created from early medieval faith. It is to this question of what future interpretations might look like that the next, short, chapter will turn.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF BELIEF**

A recurrent theme in this study has concerned the observation of changing religious capitals (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) paralleled by continued debate over the place of Christianity in British society, paradigms which previous generations of heritage professionals may have considered axiomatic. Reports of changing capitals emerged in the interviews reported in Chapter Four and, as individuals who are not distinct from society, was also suggested in the body of heritage professionals themselves. These changes are manifest in a variety of contexts and are not necessarily abstract concerns. The fading of some capitals may have significant consequences suggested, for instance, in accusations of a lack of religious literacy amongst civil servants leading to prejudicial applications of public policy (Ellis 2022,1).

These changing capitals lead to interpreters needing to face two distinct challenges. Firstly, audiences may not bring with them understandings which obviate the need for more fundamental explanations. It may be insufficient to refer to concepts such as prayer, sin, grace or salvation without describing what is meant by these and meanings related to the organisation, artefacts and practices of the Christian Church may be inaccessible or even appear arcane. An example of this is in the 7<sup>th</sup> century bulla displayed at Whitby Abbey, which is described, both on its label and in the associated guidebook (Brindle 2020, 21), as being that of Archdeacon Boniface Consiliarius. Some segments of the audience will know what an archdeacon is whereas others, perhaps most, will not. To designate something as, say, a chalice and then to offer what might seem to be a straightforward interpretation as being a cup used in Holy Communion assumes an understanding of Christian belief which seems likely to be misplaced amongst elements of the body of visitors, requiring explanations of what Communion, or whatever nomenclature is judged most appropriate, is. At the case study sites, however, the dominant form of interpretation was found to be through the context of labels and panels where the use of over 30 words on the former and 200 words on the latter is likely to lead to audience disengagement (Serrell 1996, 125-127). The need to describe complex concepts with such limited word counts is highly problematic and interpreters face unenviable choices as they attempt to best serve their visitors. The most likely resolution of

this is to be found in the opportunities that digital interpretation offers, not just in potential depth but also in the styles and approaches that can be employed to better engage the viewer. However, as has been observed, digital resources were largely unreferenced at the sites and during subsequent interviews.

The second challenge is, perhaps, even more fundamental. As audiences become more distanced from religion the worldviews of the religious past become inaccessible, if not incomprehensible, to many visitors. Although a contested claim, interpretative approaches must rely to some extent on imaginative audience empathy (Smith 2021, 45-47) and if visitors are unable to negotiate with religious world views, dismissing them as meaningless or as having no value, what emerges will be at best a pastiche which appropriates historical lives and populates them with modern beliefs and idioms. In arguing for participatory interpretative strategies, Neil Silberman advocates the abandonment of the nomenclature of 'heritage audiences' in favour of 'memory communities' (2013, 31). This, though, is the nux of the interpretative conundrum within religious heritage – how to offer up the religion of the past when a body of evidence suggests that much of the community no longer retains its memory, both in terms of knowledge and empathetic appreciation?

These two challenges invite a variety of responses. On one hand, organisations may choose to continue the interpretation of religious themes as they currently stand, that is to say an absence of the capitals to engage with religious places and objects beyond the ideation of the aesthetic and material is acknowledged as a given part of an interpretative realpolitik. It becomes accepted that, when presented with the religious, some in the audience will be able to access and create meanings whereas others, perhaps a majority, will not. Conversely, the complexities of the issue may lead to a reliance on the mantra that 'we don't do God' (Brown 2003a.) and alignment with the view that religious belief has no place in the public square and so need not be reflected in heritage contexts. This is, however, problematic on several levels, not least in the face of claims that modern western identity and discourse relies on a heritage which is fundamentally rooted in a Christian past (Holland 2019) where, before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, society was a body of Christian people rather than an 'ism' or a collection of beliefs (Bossy 1985; 171). Therefore, a conscious decision not to engage with religious

worldviews runs a danger of not just distorting the past but also of ill-serving an understanding of the present.

One arena where debates around the place of religion in national discourse has been particularly evident is in the form of religious education (RE) taught in English schools (Ofsted 2021). This space remains highly contested and the rationale for what continues to be a mandatory feature in compulsory state education is one of ongoing debate. The contested habitus of RE is in some ways analogous to that of religion in heritage contexts in that both sit within a society where the place of belief is opaque. In response to the ambiguities which surround RE, educators have created a spectrum of pedagogic approaches which seek to offer methods which assert a relevance in modern discourse (Ofsted 2021) and these approaches may offer insights in the heritage arena too. The interpretative approach (Jackson 2004; Everington 2013), for instance, argues for fair and accurate representations of the world views of religious believers and the need to allow students reflexive space to consider these views and experiences with the aim of enabling their own self-development and construction of meaning. It bears similarities to a lived religions approach, not least through a resistance to ‘othering’ and the need to appreciate the agency of individuals in negotiations within religious traditions.

The pedagogic methods applied in the interpretative approach are concerned with how religions are represented, how they are interpreted and with giving opportunity for reflexion (Jackson 2011). A particular aspect of this combination is that it acts to resist binaries and essentialisms through an emphasis on the experience of individuals and communities. It does this by acknowledging the complexities of human encounters and that what, to the outsider, may seem curious or contradictory is in fact a product of considered negotiations. It does not require the learner to phenomenologically bracket their own worldviews, rather encourages a dialogue in which new meanings can be created. As Robert Jackson notes ‘what might appear to be entirely ‘other’ might link with one's own experience in such a way that new perspectives are created or unquestioned presuppositions are challenged’ (2011, 193). It is through this appreciation of negotiated complexity and reflexive engagement that the student can begin to evaluate their encounter with belief. There seems to be little reason why these

principles cannot move out of the classroom into the heritage space where the commonalities between the two, namely the construction of understandings, remain a significant aim.

The framework for the statutory inspection of RE in England is centred around three ‘pillars of progression’: substantive knowledge, ways of knowing and personal knowledge (Ofsted 2021). Substantive knowledge concerns an understanding of rituals, practices and beliefs, while personal knowledge is discrete to the individual student and concerns their self-awareness and development of worldviews. The concept of ways of knowing is located in the requirement for students to have appropriate tools and skills for them to be able to construct epistemological meaning from substantive knowledge. These might include a breadth of scholarly methods and processes, including modes of enquiry which allow the contexts of discourses to be interrogated and through this develop personal knowledge. This three-pillared approach resonates with the concept of skilling suggested by the social anthropologist Tim Ingold (2022, 363-368). Ingold’s work emerges from a rejection of what he sees to be a Cartesian division between art and technology facilitated by the forces of production which are central to industrial capitalism (2020, 363) in favour of an ecological understanding of humans in their landscape: ‘humans do not engage with a world of their own making but rather are made by the world as they move along with it’ (Miles Watson 202, 111). Ingold rejects the view that technology inevitably leads to an evolution away from skills embedded in the rhythms of societies towards an existence of mechanistic task orientation. Instead, he suggests, what is happening is that people develop skills to cope with machines rather than their operation: ‘what it produces is not commodities for the owner of capital but his own personal and social identity’ (2020, 364). Thus, human learning has always been, and firmly remains, not a process of the acquisition of technical knowledge but rather the social development of skill.

Ingold’s model of skill is ‘a concept that proposes learning is inseparable from doing and/in place, meaning individuals become more actively self-regulating in performance through deepening their attentiveness to environmental features’ (Woods et al 2021, 1). There are three entangled components – taskscapes, guided attention and wayfinding. A taskscape is ‘the entire ensemble of tasks in their mutual interlocking’ (Ingold 2020, 195) and so exists in

a synchronicity of place, field, temporality and people. Guided attention recognises the need of a facilitator, not to impart knowledge but rather to provide inspiration. This is not instruction but can be conceived instead as enabling the individual who is becoming skilled to be more attentive, bringing to the fore things which might otherwise be hidden by the encouragement of sensory engagement. Thirdly, wayfinding concerns the movement through a physical or metaphorical landscape where ‘stories and questions are typically used by an experienced other to help a less experienced companion learn the rhythms of the taskscape in a more intimate way and are thus used while both are embedded into the taskscape’ (Woods et al 2021, 7). In sum, the wayfinder is largely self-regulating and one who is responsive to the nuances that emerge in the taskscape. “It is this attentiveness that keeps them ‘in touch’ with the world, even helping them find their way through uncharted terrain” (Woods et al 2021, 7).

As a pedagogic process, skilling continues to receive scholarly attention and has been adopted in a variety of contexts. Welby Ings (2024) describes its use with doctoral students while Woods et al (2021) develop a skilled approach in the context of sports education. A particularly apposite investigation for heritage interpretation, however, may be in Jonathan Miles-Watson’s suggestion that religion may be explored as skill (2010; 2021, 110-117). At the heart of this is the contestation, located in Ingold’s ecology, of any claim that religion is a projection onto the world in order to create meaning, rather it should be conceived as a process of discovery not creation (2021, 111) and one innately connected with the landscape through which people navigate (Ingold 2000 237-240; Miles Watson 2021, 112-113). Thus, religion is open to being understood as skill and that ‘viewing religion as a process of enskilment has the capacity to act as a corrective, to replace the sense of religion as a prescriptive noun with that of religious practices as descriptive verbs’ (Miles Watson 2021 110). Whilst this may be open to contestation, not least from those belief systems which have an emphasis on the inward reception of scriptures, it is helpful in that it enables religions to be seen as something which is done rather than simply observed. This suggests that the interpretation of religion may in turn be best approached as something that requires an active rather than passive audience where belief is presented as a process rather than a transaction.

Within the literature surrounding interpretation there has been no apparent engagement with developments in the pedagogies of religious education nor Ingold's concept of skilling despite them offering a taxonomy which would seem to offer new conceptualisations. The summary of enskilment presented here underplays the breadth of Ingold's thinking and it is likely that more detailed examinations would offer scope for further reflection. However, even with this superficiality, it is relatively easy to suggest that the interpretative environment could be understood as a taskscape and the visitor as a wayfarer through it. The interpreter, through the interpretative scheme, acts to guide the visitor's attention and the whole can be seen as an ecological system. Although skilling resonates with Tilden's assertion that interpretation is an art form, ultimately his, perhaps, mechanistic aim of ensuring the future protection of heritage through the creation of understanding, with its implicit supporting hierarchies (2007, 65), is rejected in favour of allowing people to develop their sense of place within a heritage landscape. Attentiveness is not necessarily achieved through provocation (Tilden 2007, 18) but rather through the development of skill to observe nuance and apply it in the creation of meaning.

An interpretation centred around skill would be one where the audience would be aided in developing tools and skills through which meaning might be created. While this is already the aim of much interpretation, the employment of the concept of skilling provides a slightly different vocabulary and distinctive conceptual pathways. This taskscape would be one which is less concerned with the Ofsted's substantive knowledge and more with an enablement that allows personal meanings to be made. This may be especially helpful if, as has been suggested here, many visitors find a religious worldview difficult to comprehend because of the prevalence of essentialist modern discourses accompanied by a variety of tropes and memes generated around the practice of belief. In this interpretative ecology, visitors cease to become audiences but rather wayfarers moving around sites and galleries, supported by the light touch of affirming and encouraging interpretation. Interpretative methodologies would continue to move away from the didactic and focus on allowing places and things to be seen through different perspectives, employing and sharing the skills that lie at the heart of the professional view. The concern of the message that the scheme intends to convey (Ham 2013, 20; Veverka 2016, 55-56) is augmented by the aim of imparting some of those skills which

enable professionals to arrive at such aims in the first place, de-privileging the AHD and developing co-curation and wider participation.

Of course, it is the case that some places already adopt schemes which encompass aspects of such an approach, for instance in ‘Cold Case Whithorn’ (The Whithorn Trust 2025), and it may be that some visitors develop skills regardless of institutional aims. One of the most striking features of watching people tracing interlacing on worked stone with their fingers at Whithorn Priory Museum was the way in which the encounter moved beyond the mediation of an interpretative scheme to something more inherently personal. It suggested the phrase *Able Minds and Practised Hands*, the title of the volume in which the interpretative intent around the stones is described (Yeoman 2005). By tracing the pattern, visitors’ minds and hands were engaged with in a way which transcended the surrounding panels and labels and a different order of meaning appeared to be created. This resonates with the use of skilling in sports education (Woods et al 2021) where meaning, and understanding, is created through a mimetic physical engagement rather than through didacticism. Whithorn Priory Museum stood in some contrast to the display of worked stone elsewhere which was either placed out of reach or behind protective glass although being able to touch the stones was certainly not a design intention in the interpretative scheme. Rightly, the idea of visitors touching exhibits would raise various concerns but why, though, might a facsimile of part of the stone not be placed within touching distance, accompanied by the encouragement to open an encounter based less on a written description and more on the relationships between sensory engagement, the material and the artisan’s skill?

The role of acting as a guide who coaches rather than as an educator who explains is merely a change in nomenclature for some of the activities that heritage professionals already undertake. It has been anticipated in a variety of places and activities such as the engagement with communities and individuals as reported at Jarrow (Benson and Cremin, 2019) and, again, in the ‘Cold Case’ approach at Whithorn (Whithorn Trust 2025). As an approach, enskilment lends itself to developing a relationship with the practical and physical but is more problematical when attempting to engage with hidden interior worlds. It is here, however, where the pillars used to develop taxonomies in RE may be used to provide the



encouragement to move away from didacticism and look to provide the tools with which meaning can be made. Heritage organisations are already likely to be using these pedagogic tools in educational programmes and so all that may be needed is the inspiration to expand their use into different contexts.

In practice, what might such interpretations look like? An example might be to consider the Viking Raider Stone at Lindisfarne (figures 5.4 and 5.5). The aim would be to create a discovery-centric interpretative environment (Hein 1998; Mosser 2010) and to help visitors acquire or develop their skills as co-constructors in the creation of meaning (Simon 2010). This can be begun in the acknowledgement that the stone has been described and conceptualised in a variety of ways since its re-discovery in 1924 and that it is not certain what the images on its two faces represent (Cramp 1984). This would act to confirm the trustworthiness of the interpretative performance by embracing transparency (Marstine 2011; Lynch 2013) and legitimising and valuing visitors' roles in creating meaning. The next step would be the creation of interpretative layers (Slack 2021, 114-115), developing themes (Ham 2013) so that they support and inform each other. Layers might adopt themes around the known history of the stone, its materiality, the processes by which it was created, what is known about the beliefs of the society which created it and what its iconography might mean. Where it would differ from other thematic approaches (Ham 2013) is that rather than there being a 'single message, main point, moral to the story [or] premise' (2013, 256) the emphasis would be on the development and support of the skills to develop and test meanings. So, as an example, the stone has been dated as 9<sup>th</sup> century, based in part on the shape of the pommels of the swords the raiders carry (Cramp 1984). Visitors could be invited to evaluate this evidence through links to other objects and consider if this might have an application in the biography, and meaning, of the stone. At the same time religious material could be introduced, for instance the biblical predictions of the apocalypse and Anglian writings about it, and through this presentation of evidence visitors invited to analyse, evaluate and create meanings. Moving on from this, early medieval understandings of judgement could be explored, together with the sources and consequences of that belief, and so allow connections to be created with other items on display such as, at Lindisfarne, the collection of name stones. This allows medieval voices to be heard and a lived, narrative,

approach adopted that re-vivifies the Raider Stone's creators and the communities in which they lived.

Some of these aims could be achieved in a physical interpretative scheme which employed sequential theme development (Ham 2013, 174-203) where the interpreter gradually exposes the audience to information and thus creates an environment in which themes can be explored in increasing depth. However, this approach is not necessarily congruent with constructivist paradigms, nor does it address the pragmatic limitations inherent in even the best designed and engaging text-centric panels, labels and interactive displays. Rather, the enskilment approach would seem to resonate with digital mediums and their ability to move beyond the engagement offered by more traditional two-dimensional panels and into the exploration of new avenues of interpretative practice (Staif 2014, 25; Museum Galleries Scotland 2024). In seeking such more layered, immersive and sensory interpretation (Ablett and Dyer 2009; Slack 2021, 117-118; Bender et al 2024) interpretations can inclusively engage different worldviews, ages, languages and learning styles (Slack 2021, 72-78) while embracing complexity in as much detail as the user wishes.

The combination of the interpretative religious education approach and skilling as a model for the interpretation of religious heritage offers resistance to essentialisms and binaries, an emphasis on enabling accurate representations of lived belief, a model through which new capitals can be created and a philosophy around which praxis can coalesce. It moves from didacticism and loosely constructed narrative and offers clear handrails in the creation of interpretative schemes. Of course, none of this is new, but if the religion of the past is now so fundamentally inaccessible to many visitors while engagement with heritage is an essential component of necessary cultural discourse (Silberman 2013), new models are required to enable the co-existence of multivalent meanings in a post-structuralist age.

## CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this project was to identify themes which ran through the heritage interpretation of the Christianity of the Northumbrian Golden Age. It was supported by three objectives: the investigation of the presentation of belief as a separate and distinct area of interpretation that necessitated specific approaches, the description of the relationship between archaeological and other material discourses in interpretative schemes and the development of an understanding of the heritage use of Northumbrian belief in the creation and maintenance of modern identities.

The use of the process of Reflective Thematic Analysis allowed an insight into the entangled themes through which interpretation comes about. A wide variety of factors were demonstrated to influence interpretative forms, ranging from the perceptions and values of professionals through to the need to preserve and conserve unique artefacts. Perhaps the most recurrent emergent themes, however, are those which indicate the influences which both limit and direct the form of interpretative schemes. These can be summed up as belonging to three distinct taxonomies: those concerned with the pragmatic, those emerging from the conceptual and those concerned with the anticipation of audience responses. The intersection of these three elements is where schemes come to be located.

The pragmatic factors which shape interpretation have been frequently rehearsed in the previous chapters. They primarily concern resources and inheritances. All interpretation is necessarily limited by budgets and professionals must tailor interpretations to fit within them. At a time when engagement with heritage has largely become a leisure activity, and one where external funding is linked with social outcomes, professionals must ensure that interpretations support financial viabilities. Schemes must be both attractive to visitors and allow meaningful engagements, perhaps on terms which are not the professional's own. This is very much the lesson which emerges from the troubled history of Bede's World and its successors at Jarrow and was an observable theme at other case studies where the need to generate income was clearly expressed. In the absence of independent funding streams, the operation of heritage becomes dependant on sympathetic responses to politicised societal

norms and their hurried expectations need to be balanced against the instincts of academic detachment, the embracing of complexity and considered debate. Something of these dynamics might be seen at Lindisfarne in the inclusion of the assemblage of fish vertebrae beads and the vampiric emphasis of the gift shop at Whitby Abbey.

A second tranche of pragmatic influences was found in the inheritances which professionals receive. Most fundamentally, this rests in the physical environment in which interpretation is to take place. The material palimpsests at Whithorn, Lindisfarne and Whitby act to emphasise a high medieval past through standing walls and masonry. Although the aim may be to tell other stories, the physical dominance of these remains inevitably returns the visitor's gaze to this one period and may frustrate the presentation of other narratives. This may be an area where digital interpretations could make an immediate, and relatively straightforward, impact. The objects available for display can also either facilitate or discourage interpretative aims. Individual artefacts are likely have entangled biographies and some, such as the Viking Raider Stone at Lindisfarne, have acquired dominant cultural interpretations which subaltern other meanings. Questions of authenticity hang around the reception of replicas and the absence of some objects, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, leaves a didactic void. How these realities may be faced is a very real interpretative choice, whether it be one of the celebration of the multifarious intricacies and contradictions of materialities or a concentration on the development of narrower, yet deeper, meanings. For physical interpretations, this will be largely dictated by the space in which they can take place and the form that this will allow; the packed 'cabinets of curiosity' in Whitby Town Museum standing in stark contrast to the purpose-built open spaces in Edinburgh's National Museum. Professionals must also engage with the interpretative schemes which they may inherit, not least if there is an expectation that displays will remain relevant to both audiences and institutional outlooks for periods of a decade or more with, perhaps, little opportunity of revision or redesign.

A second taxonomy is concerned with the conceptual, that is the spread of ideation which accompanies heritage performances. These are more varied than those concerned with the pragmatic which combine to create relatively tangible boundaries around the forms that interpretations can take. Perhaps most influential conceptualisations are the values which professionals and institutions hold through their understanding of purpose and the

mechanisms and behaviours that can be employed to achieve this. The concept of the AHD can be used as a descriptive tool in mapping these values, especially in the deployment of expertise with its concentration of epistemic authority. This authority extends beyond archaeological or historical knowledge into areas concerned with the nature of audiences and the most appropriate interpretative processes with which to serve them. An inability to access developed audience research hindered a full understanding in this study of the discourses around interpretative decision making, although professionals maintained they had a keen understanding of their visitors and so could provide meaningful interactions with places and things. The role of communities outside of institutions in the creation of interpretation was, however, less clear although the intent to develop participatory practice was openly expressed; it was the mechanism by which this could take place which appeared uncertain.

Other areas also suggested the presence of the authorised discourse. It was notable that an aesthetic scaffolding was applied to encourage some meanings, especially that around worked stone and that other constructions were sidelined. Generally, religious narratives received little attention and the early medieval fascination with death and judgement only loosely referenced. A generic advocacy of the spiritual was, however, present in interpretations although the definition of what this meant was largely left open. The idea of spiritual benefit trumped suggestions of political gain as the reason for Northumbrian conversion. There was no suggestion of a Marxist-inspired interpretative narrative concentrating on economic and technological facets of Anglian society (Gilchrist 2020). The emphasis on the spiritual was accompanied by environmental themes and the lingering presence of a Celtic church which professionals found difficult to reconcile with scholarly development and these received discourses rubbed awkwardly against revisionist accounts. This was particularly observable in narratives around the lives of the Northumbrian and early medieval saints, notably in the account of the dating on the panel referencing Ninian at Whithorn. In such cases interpretations tended to favour traditional understandings with little further analysis pointing to an aim that was largely the support of received meanings rather than offering any interpretative challenge.

This emphasis on the traditional points to the third taxonomy of influencing factors, namely the response which interpretations receive. This strongly supports the suggestion that

audiences have a pivotal role in the performance of heritage and the attendant perceptions of authority and authenticity which they confer. That organisations were reluctant to challenge traditional narratives speaks into the power which visitors hold as interpretative performers, something of which professionals appear aware through the strategies they employ but not necessarily one which is well articulated. This reluctance is of some interest in that it illustrates a moment where authorisation does not necessarily align with expertise, rather it emerges from a more affective response and in this accords with recent developments in the theorisation of the role of emotion in the creation of the AHD (Smith 2021).

Audience response was most frequently anticipated in the presentation of complexity where interpretative schemes largely shied away from developing involved and entangled concepts. In part this may be seen through the ubiquitous use at the case study sites of word-limited labels and panels as the primary vehicle of interpretative performance. Equally, however, it speaks to a hesitancy over the degree to which audiences will engage with complex concepts and ideas and whether these can be successfully communicated within heritage places as they move from an inherited didacticism. The result of this avoidance of complexity is that processes of gradual change and development are dismissed in favour of the essentialisms of binary presentations. This is observable in those interpretations concerning the Whitby Synod with the frequent suggestion of unresolvable conflict, paradigm shift and the triumph of one party over another. The presentation of complexity is an area where the development of digital interpretations will no doubt help through the creation of layered and targeted material that allows more nuanced reflections. There was a certain sense that this research was conducted at a point in time where the textual didacticism of previous generations was giving way at the case study sites to other paradigms, with participatory approaches being more confidently embraced. It would be of considerable interest to revisit these places in ten or twenty years and reflect on how these questions are then approached and what interpretative mechanisms are employed.

Of the objectives of this study, that concerning a distinctiveness in the interpretation of religion remains open. Professionals reported the belief that modern audiences did not share the religious capitals of the past and upon further consideration believed that interpretative approaches would have to change to allow the fullest constructions of meaning. Despite this,

however, the observed interpretive schemes rarely developed Christian concepts and ideas in any depth and appeared quite comfortable in using language and models which may have occluded meanings for those who engaged with them. This is, however, unsurprising in view of the more general reluctance to develop complex themes compounded by the fact that the age of some schemes was such that they could only be understood as being developed in the habitus of previous generations. What strongly emerged from some professional participants, however, was a sense of the deep unfashionability of religion in some heritage quarters in Britain, something particularly true of Christianity and its wider legacy and supported by several direct references. Whether this is because faith is viewed as inaccessible and alienating for audiences or if it is an expression of secular hegemonies is uncertain and an area requiring further investigation. Either way this firmly locates both professionals and heritage institutions in the post-structural society which they serve, reinforcing that heritage is a socio-political concept.

The second objective concerned the deployment of archaeological theorisations in the portrayal of the period. Interpretative schemes were seen to be strongly correlated to material narratives and were led by the archaeological evidence and research that informed both places and things. The enthusiasm at Lindisfarne to include artefacts that emerged from excavation, even as the revised scheme was being finalised, demonstrates a dynamic relationship between emergent materialities and interpretative outputs. However, the limitations of some of the interpretative mechanisms that were deployed, not least in the difficulties of the necessarily concise presentation of complex ideas, effectively prevented the presentation of more developed concepts. There was, for instance, little evidence of responses to theories such as the minster hypothesis and more recent work on changes in the spatial organisation of monasteries over their lifetimes went unremarked. Individual artefacts, such as Cuthbert's pectoral cross and the Latinus Stone, were however celebrated, suggesting that more accessible, or perhaps successful, narratives could be created around specific objects.

That professionals voiced opinions that suggested that the interpretations over which they presided were open to debate, or possibly even inaccurate, is notable in that it confirms their continued engagement with the academy. It was not, however, always clear quite what form these channels took with the attendant suspicion that in some cases the theories that were

deployed might yet have to reach full maturity. This may be especially true when professional backgrounds lie outside of the scope of the immediate interpretive need. The investigation of sources of authority within heritage settings would prove an interesting avenue of research.

The objective of the investigation of the role of early medieval heritage in the creation of identity led to the observation of several ambiguities. It was clear that professionals felt that their work and institutions bolstered identity although there was little empirical support for this perspective. While the utilisation of symbols, places and narratives could be observed in a variety of contexts, whether the meanings applied to them tallied with those developed in heritage contexts is uncertain. Two separate discourses around the early medieval were apparent in Scotland and England, the former concerned with a politicised national identity, and the latter gathered in support of the regional. This English construct may be staged and garnered to facilitate economic benefit, not least through the development of tourism and pilgrimage, although the evidence of this was relatively peripheral. There was no suggestion of the operation of a religious heritage complex (Isnart and Cerezales 2020) suggesting that sites and artefacts have largely lost their religious agency, acquiescing to artistic, aesthetic and other meanings. The exceptions to this may be St Paul's Church in Jarrow and Durham Cathedral which as places of worship can appeal to other sources of identity and authenticity. However, the relationship between them and the wider tourist industry did not form part of this study and remains a source of some speculation.

Whether heritage places have a role in the support of religious identities was largely unconsidered. Although the use of heritage in religious constructions was a repeated theme, these responses to places and artefacts were othered and where they were encountered, such as with the reliquary at Jarrow, met with some degree of bemusement and hesitancy. There was little space in which visitors could unpack their own 'baggage' (Berns 2017). This may simply indicate a societal unfamiliarity with the practice of belief reflected into heritage settings, though equally might be an indicator of the undercurrent of elements of an authorised discourse emerging from secular hegemonies. The exception to this was in Durham Cathedral where different embodied values created an environment which awarded other permissions and meanings that were not observed elsewhere. However, this created



other ambiguities, not least in the Great Kitchen where the paradigm between its own biography, its performance as an exhibition space, the artefacts displayed in it and the sacred space of the Cathedral was uncertain.

Within the broad aim of characterising interpretative approaches, the case study sites suggested that labels and panels are conceived as the primary medium for communication with audiences and in the creation of meaning. Most of the written interpretation was didactic in style and while narrative was only occasionally deployed the intent to create an accessible story undergirded some schemes such as that around the name stones at Lindisfarne. The revised Lindisfarne display was notable in its intent to revivify those whose names were recorded and in this de-objectify them, encouraging audiences to consider the people behind the memorialisation of the stones. None of the observed schemes overtly adopted a lived experience approach and so other than quotations from Bede and Alcuin the voices of Northumbria remained largely silent.

All the case study sites reflected wider historical and material narratives outside of the early medieval. At some sites there was a clear relationship between the results of excavation, particularly at Whithorn, Jarrow and Lindisfarne, whereas at others, such as Whitby, even more recent archaeological work received only limited attention. Sites had to reflect complex biographies and the processes by which interpretations were weighted towards different periods and inheritances was not always apparent. This is an area worthy of further investigation and may point to other discourses which relate to perceptions of the relevance of the early medieval in the wider public imagination and the paradigms that professionals use when deciding to promote certain themes over others.

Interview participants articulated the view that large proportions of their audiences were so removed from organised religion to make these belief systems irrelevant if not unintelligible. The capitals which enabled an appreciation of Christianity were increasingly absent while individual expressions of spirituality became the lenses through which meanings were created. As has been shown, this is not true of all the audience, but it nonetheless acts to limit the scope of meanings with a likelihood that they might be based on misapprehension. The

design of this research deliberately excluded audiences and while this remains the missing component in understanding the interpretative environment it offers a clear next step in confirming the accuracy of professional perception. A clearer understanding of the knowledge and perspectives that visitors bring is necessary to shape the interpretation of religious themes. In this it has been suggested here that modern pedagogies, with their emphases on the development of the tools and skills to create meanings authentic for both the visitor and the subject, offer new vistas and when combined with emerging virtual technologies point to new possibilities.

The hope for this research is that it will contribute to the interpretative field not least in its claim that the need for a distinctive approach to early medieval Christian faith, and by extension to other periods and religions, is a necessary development if this heritage is to remain accessible to a broad body of visitors. In recognising the ongoing adoption of participatory practice, it advocates those approaches that allow audiences to develop their own interpretative skills and points to the importance of finding ways in which the voices of the past can authentically be heard if modern meaning is to be made. It suggests that artistic and aesthetic meanings are incomplete if there is no contextualisation of why places and things were created, their use and how they were conceptualised, not least those which are grounded in Christian belief. This thesis began with the observation of the disparity between the audience reception of, and engagement with, the portrayal of Northumbrian Christianity and those of later periods in Edinburgh. Is it now time for ‘enchantment, wonder and rapture’ (Staiff 2014, 160) to be sought for the heritage interpretation of early medieval religion too?

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## Appendix 1

### Interview Consent, Participant Information, Privacy Notice and Debriefing Sheets

#### Consent Form

**Project title:** How do heritage organisations in the North East of England and in Scotland interpret the 'Golden Age' of Northumbrian Christianity?

**Researcher:** Ian Colson

**Department:** Archaeology

**Contact details:** [ian.r.colson@durham.ac.uk](mailto:ian.r.colson@durham.ac.uk)

**Supervisor name:** Dr David Petts

**Supervisor contact details:** [d.a.petts@durham.ac.uk](mailto:d.a.petts@durham.ac.uk)

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 3 <sup>rd</sup> May 2022 and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand that interviews will be recorded and who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project. I understand that I may be quoted directly in any thesis resulting from this project (whilst remaining anonymous).	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____ (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) _____
---------------------------------------------------------------------------

### **Participant Information Sheet**

**Project title:** How do heritage organisations in the North East of England and in Scotland interpret the 'Golden Age' of Northumbrian Christianity?

**Researcher(s):** Ian Colson

**Department:** Archaeology

**Contact details:** ian.r.colson@durham.ac.uk

**Supervisor name:** Dr D. A. Petts

**Supervisor contact details:** d.a.petts@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of a PhD at Durham University. This study has received ethical approval from the Department of Archaeology ethics committee at Durham University.

My background is that after thirty years working as a Church of England minister, I've taken the opportunity to go back to university to conduct research into the ways in which heritage organisations interpret religious belief for contemporary audiences. I am particularly interested in Early Medieval Christianity and in the 'Golden Age' of seventh and eighth century Northumbria. I hold an MA in both Religious Education and Heritage and Interpretation and am fusing insights from these two disciplines together in this study.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of this study is to better understand the heritage discourses which lie behind interpretative schemes. This includes:

- The relationship between current archaeological thought and interpretive outcomes.
- The challenges around authentically representing belief in a society with limited religious literacy.
- The pressures which institutions are placed under to conform to wider narratives.
- The question of the presentation of the materiality of religion alongside doctrinal beliefs and convictions.

#### **Why have I been invited to take part?**

You have been invited because of your experience and expertise in this area. Some interviewees will specifically be invited because their institution or organisation may be used in a case study within the overall work.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be invited to take part in one or more semi-structured interviews which are arranged at your convenience either in person or via Zoom. These are open ended discussions where the researcher has a small number of prepared questions to guide a conversation. Each conversation is likely to take between 45 minutes and an hour. These conversations are recorded and then transcribed.

**Are there any potential risks involved? Will my data be kept confidential?**

Unless you specifically give permission or request it, you will not be named in any subsequent work although your comments may be directly quoted. Institutions may, however, be named and your comments might be put into context by ascribing them to, for instance, 'a curator at The ABC Museum' or 'a manager at XYZ site'.

Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

**What will happen to the results of the project?**

The likely completion date of this research will be in 2025 and it may be that the research provides the basis for both conference papers and published work. All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of the project but any interview data will have been anonymised immediately after transcription and recordings of interviews deleted.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

**Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's [Complaints Process](#).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.



Durham University's responsibilities under data protection legislation include the duty to ensure that we provide individuals with information about how we process personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. This privacy notice provides a general description of the broad range of processing activity in addition there are tailored privacy notices covering some specific processing activity.

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken.

#### **PART 1 – GENERIC PRIVACY NOTICE**

Please access our [General Privacy Notice](#) online.

#### **PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE**

This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide personal data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

##### **Project Title:**

PhD Research Project - How do heritage organisations in the North East of England and in Scotland interpret the 'Golden Age' of Northumbrian Christianity?

##### **Type(s) of personal data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection:**

The aim of this research is to investigate the discourses which lie behind the interpretation in heritage settings of Early Medieval Christianity. As part of this, because of your professional expertise and experience, you have been invited to take part in a semi-structured interview with the researcher. The data collected will come from a recorded discussion between you and the researcher which will be transcribed.

##### **Lawful Basis**

The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: the processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research.

For further information see:

<https://durham.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/governance/dp/legalbasis/>

#### **How personal data is stored:**

All personal data will be held securely and strictly confidential to the researcher. Data in electronic form will be stored on a password protected computer, and any hardcopies will be kept in locked storage. The conversation will be recorded and stored on an encrypted device until it has been transcribed by the researcher. No-one else will have access to the recording, and it will be erased once the transcript has been completed.

#### **How personal data is processed:**

The information that comes from the conversation between you and the researcher will be used in one of two ways:

- To suggest new pathways for further research
- To inform the researcher's observations of interpretative schemes and the processes

and conversations that lie behind them.

You will be anonymised but heritage sites and organisations may not be. So, an interviewee could be referred to as 'a curator from X museum' or 'a manager from Y'.

Once the recorded conversation has been transcribed by the researcher it will be deleted. The transcription will be anonymised and on submission of the dissertation (expected in 2025) all original records, including anything that may identify you personally such as consent forms, will be destroyed.

#### **Withdrawal of data**

You can request withdrawal of your data until it has been fully anonymised. Once this has happened it will not be possible to identify you from any of the data we hold.

#### **Who the researcher shares personal data with:**

The researcher will use commercial transcription software (Otter.ai), which is fully GDPR compliant. After transcription, all interview recordings will be deleted.

Comments that you make may be directly quoted in any thesis resulting from this research, you will, however, remain anonymous. Doctoral theses are publicly available through the Durham University library.

Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

**How long personal data is held by the researcher:**

Data will be anonymised during transcription and will not be held beyond the submission of the PhD thesis

**How to object to the processing of your personal data for this project:**

If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your personal data, or you wish to withdraw your data from the project, please contact the researcher, Ian Colson:  
[ian.r.colson@durham.ac.uk](mailto:ian.r.colson@durham.ac.uk)

**Further information:**

Further information may be gained from the project supervisor, Dr David Petts:  
[d.a.petts@durham.ac.uk](mailto:d.a.petts@durham.ac.uk)



### Debriefing Sheet

Project title: **PhD Research - How do heritage organisations in the North East of England and in Scotland interpret the 'Golden Age' of Northumbrian Christianity?**

Thank you for taking part in this study. I am grateful for your time and our conversation will be used to frame further questions and to help identify wider discourses in the interpretation of religious belief in heritage contexts

The recording of our conversation will be deleted after being transcribed and you will remain anonymous in any subsequent paper or thesis.

If after reflecting on our conversation you feel that there is more that can be added I would very much like to hear from you. I very much value your experience and insights and would welcome any further contact.

If you would like further information about the study or would like to know about what my findings are when all the data has been collected and analysed then please contact me on [ian.r.colson@durham.ac.uk](mailto:ian.r.colson@durham.ac.uk).

Thank you once again for your help and for your time.

Ian Colson

## Appendix 2

### Interview Phase One Question Schedule (first version)

#### Question Set, Phase One Interviews 2022

1. Could you talk a little about your background and your involvement in heritage?
2. Do you think there is a live conversation about the interpretation of religious heritage and, if so, how do you see this?
3. Are you aware of any policies for the interpretation of religious heritage?
4. Are there any particular challenges in the interpretation of religion?
5. What is your experience of visitors and the ways they engage with religious belief
6. Do you think it's easier for staff with a religious background to work around religious themes?
7. What question should I have asked? Who else should I be speaking to?

## Indicative Phase Two Question Set

Question set: Participant XZ from ABC. May 2023

1. Could you talk me through the aims of ABC and your general approach to interpretation.
2. When was the exhibition produced?
3. Was there a key message to be transmitted?
4. Why does it concentrate on *theme Y* and not Northumbrian Christianity as a whole?  
Follow up: Who was the exhibition for?
5. How big is the collection? How dependant is it on material excavated from the site?
6. What sort of understanding of Christianity did you think that visitors bring with them?
7. Do you know if there was external involvement in creating the scheme and if so from where?
8. What do think is the most successful aspect of the scheme? Is there anything you'd like to change?
9. Is there anything else I should have asked? Is there anyone else I should talk to?

*(Researcher's note: previous visits to ABC had raised questions over how the interpretative scheme had come about and why one theme seemed to dominate. It was suspected that the scheme was a reflection of particular historical local issues. Questions 2,3,4,5 relate directly to these observations.)*