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REVEALING CHESHIRE'S PAST

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Invasion and Settlement

3 Saxons



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Who Lived Here?

In the late 4th century AD, Britain was threatened with invasion from across the North Sea. An appeal to Rome for help was unsuccessful as Barbarians were attacking the other frontiers of the Empire. Rome withdrew administrative and military support from Britain and the Anglo-Saxons invaded and settled, creating new kingdoms.

Cheshire became a frontier zone, at times part of the Welsh kingdom of Powys then later part of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia.

Vikings from Denmark and Norway then invaded Britain; the first attacks were in the late 8th century AD.

Part of Mercia was controlled by Danish Vikings but a series of defended sites was established to protect the Cheshire plain by Aethelflaed, "Lady of the Mercians". Mercia returned to English rule and a succession of powerful earls governed Cheshire until the Norman Conquest.

The Anglo-Saxons came to Britain from North Germany and Southern Scandinavia in the 5th century. They crossed the North Sea in search of new land and prosperity.

At first, they colonised eastern England and created new kingdoms. They brought with them distinctive objects, evident from the elaborate grave goods found in pagan burial sites such as Sutton Hoo in Suffolk. They gradually moved westwards and by the 7th century Cheshire was part of the Mercian Kingdom.

We know little about life in Cheshire before the Anglo-Saxons arrived, though we know the land was being farmed, as there is evidence of post-Roman ploughing outside the old Roman fortress at Chester.



10th century strap-end from Bruen Stapleford

Self-sufficient farmsteads would have been the most common settlements as people moved away from the once

prosperous Roman forts and towns.

In Middlewich, salt production continued after the Roman army left and was possibly controlled by the early Christian church, as suggested by the inscription on a lead salt-pan.

The **Domesday Book** records saltworking in the 11th century at Nantwich, Northwich and Middlewich.



Possible Christian inscription on a lead salt-pan

There is evidence that Christianity was well established in the region before the arrival of the Saxons. Place name evidence points to a possible pre-Saxon church at Eccleston, near Chester and there was a monastery at Bangor on Dee, Wales.



Saxon sword pommel from Mouldsworth

5th century 6th century 7th century 8th century 9th century 10th century 11th century

Early Saxon buckle



Pennanular Brooch from Shavington



Chester mint coin of Edward the Elder (899-924)



Saxon Life

Coins

In times of trouble, people would sometimes bury their valuables for safekeeping. If they failed to retrieve them, or forgot where they were buried, they can be found hundreds of years later.

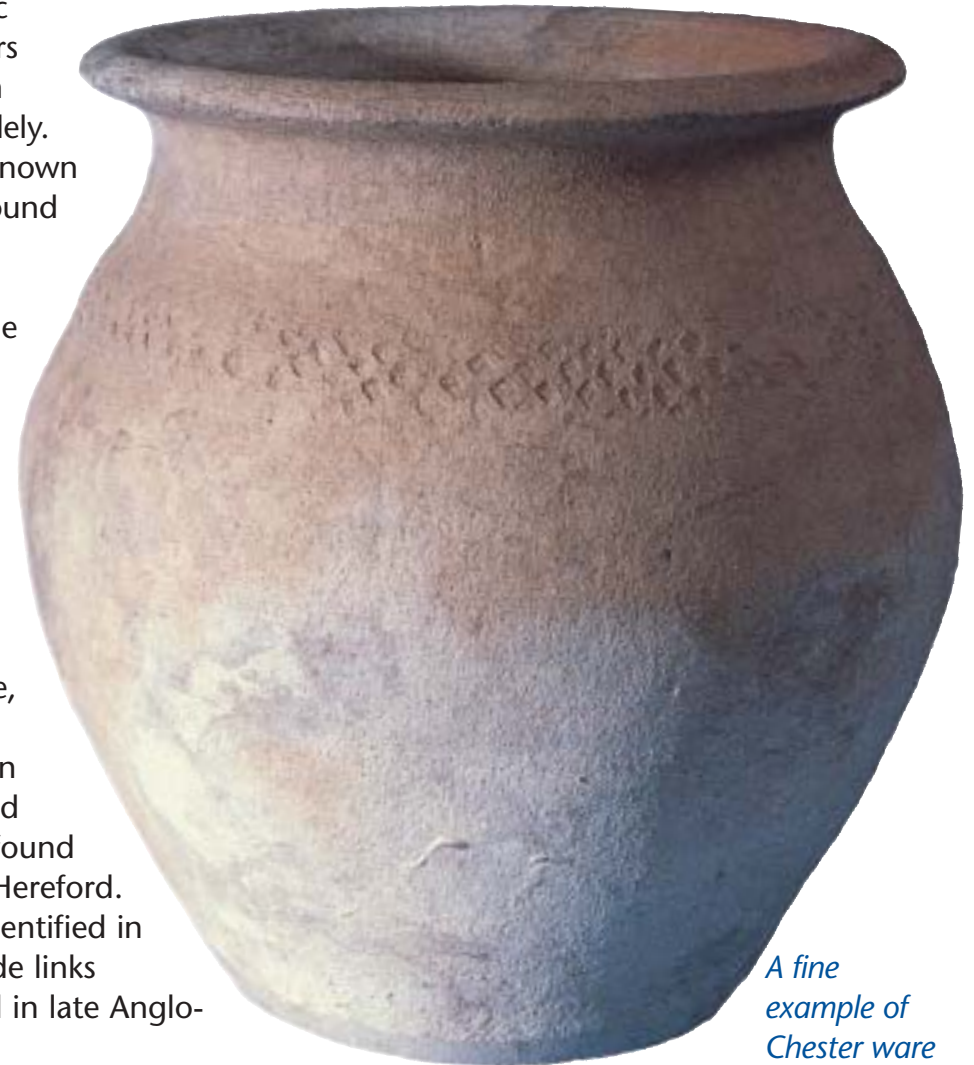


*Viking silver hoard found in Chester. The hoard consists of over 500 Saxon silver pennies, silver ingots of varying sizes and over 100 pieces of **hacksilver**. It may have belonged to a Viking trader.*

Pottery

Pottery production after the end of the Roman period was small scale, with people making their own pottery for domestic use. By the 9th century, potters were producing wheel thrown pottery, which was traded widely. A hard sandy brown pottery known as "Chester ware" has been found mostly in Chester, but also at Tatton, Poulton and Grange Cow Worth, Ellesmere Port, the site of a medieval farm.

These wheel thrown pots have sagging bases and would have been used for cooking over an open fire. They often have a repeated impressed decoration around the shoulder. Despite its name, "Chester ware" was made in Stafford, where a kiln has been found. It dates to the 10th and 11th centuries and has been found across Mercia as far south as Hereford. Chester ware has also been identified in Dublin. There were active trade links between Cheshire and Ireland in late Anglo-Saxon times.



A fine example of Chester ware

Saxon Life *continued*

Viking Influence

Danish Vikings settled permanently in the north and east of Britain, controlling an area known as the Danelaw.

In Cheshire there is evidence that Norwegian Vikings, expelled from Ireland, settled on the Wirral. There are many place names with Scandinavian origins such as Irby, "the Irishman's village" and Thingwall, "Field where the assembly meets".



Fragments of 5 late Saxon crosses (left) were found at the church of St Mary and St Helen in Neston when it was rebuilt in 1874. The style of carving is similar to Viking sculpture from Britain, Ireland and the Isle of Man and dates between 930 and 1020AD.



The decorative patterns introduced to Britain by the Vikings can be seen on a number of objects found in Cheshire.

10th century bone belt plaque with "tree of life" decoration



This rare brooch (above) is one of only a few found in Britain. The intricate pattern of an intertwined animal is a distinctive style of Viking art.



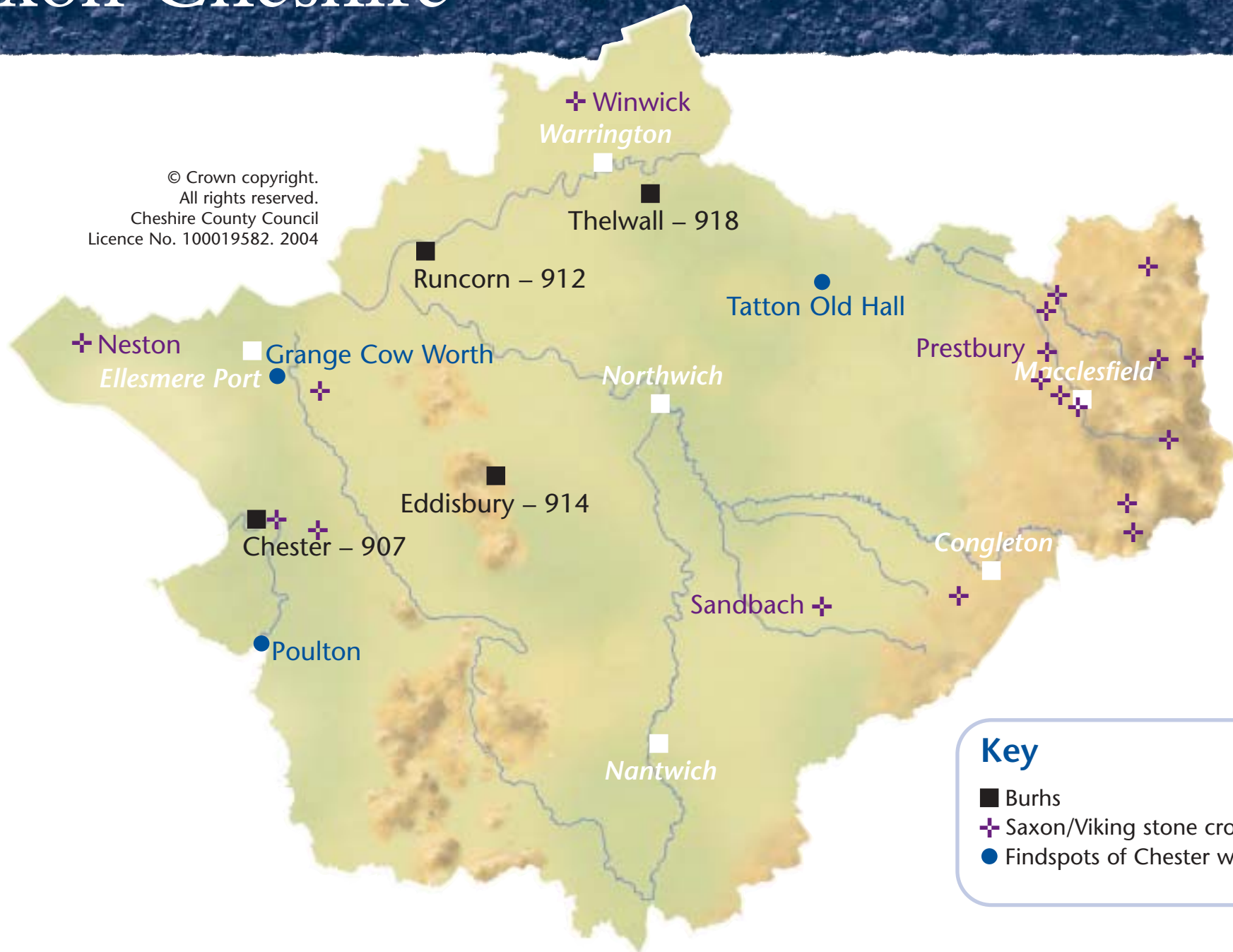
Jet game pieces from Warrington. Used for Hnefatafl, a Scandinavian board game.



Ring headed pins have been found in Chester and at the trading settlement of Meols on the Wirral. They are identical to ones found in Viking Age Ireland.

Saxon Cheshire

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Key

- Burhs
- ✚ Saxon/Viking stone crosses
- Findspots of Chester ware

Where They Lived

We know the locations of a number of Saxon settlements, through both physical and documentary evidence.

Archaeological evidence of Saxon buildings is rare, though excavation at Tatton Park shows a period of late Saxon occupation.

People were also living among the ruins of the old Roman fort at Chester. Excavation has found evidence of a rectangular sunken hut, which dates to the 9th century and was built before Chester was refortified in 907. This is shown in the reconstruction above. These sunken huts were probably workshops.

Some settlements can also be identified by their place names. The name Frodsham (Frotes-ham) is Saxon with ~ham being Old English for homestead or village.

Burhs

Defensive enclosures were not a common feature of Saxon settlements until the Viking invasion when King Alfred of Wessex built burhs (fortified towns) to protect his kingdom.

Cheshire suffered a number of Viking attacks in the 10th century. Aethelflaed (wife of the



Mercian ruler Ethelred I) and her brother Edward the Elder, built a string of fortified settlements to protect Mercia's northern frontier. The founding of some of these is recorded in the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**.

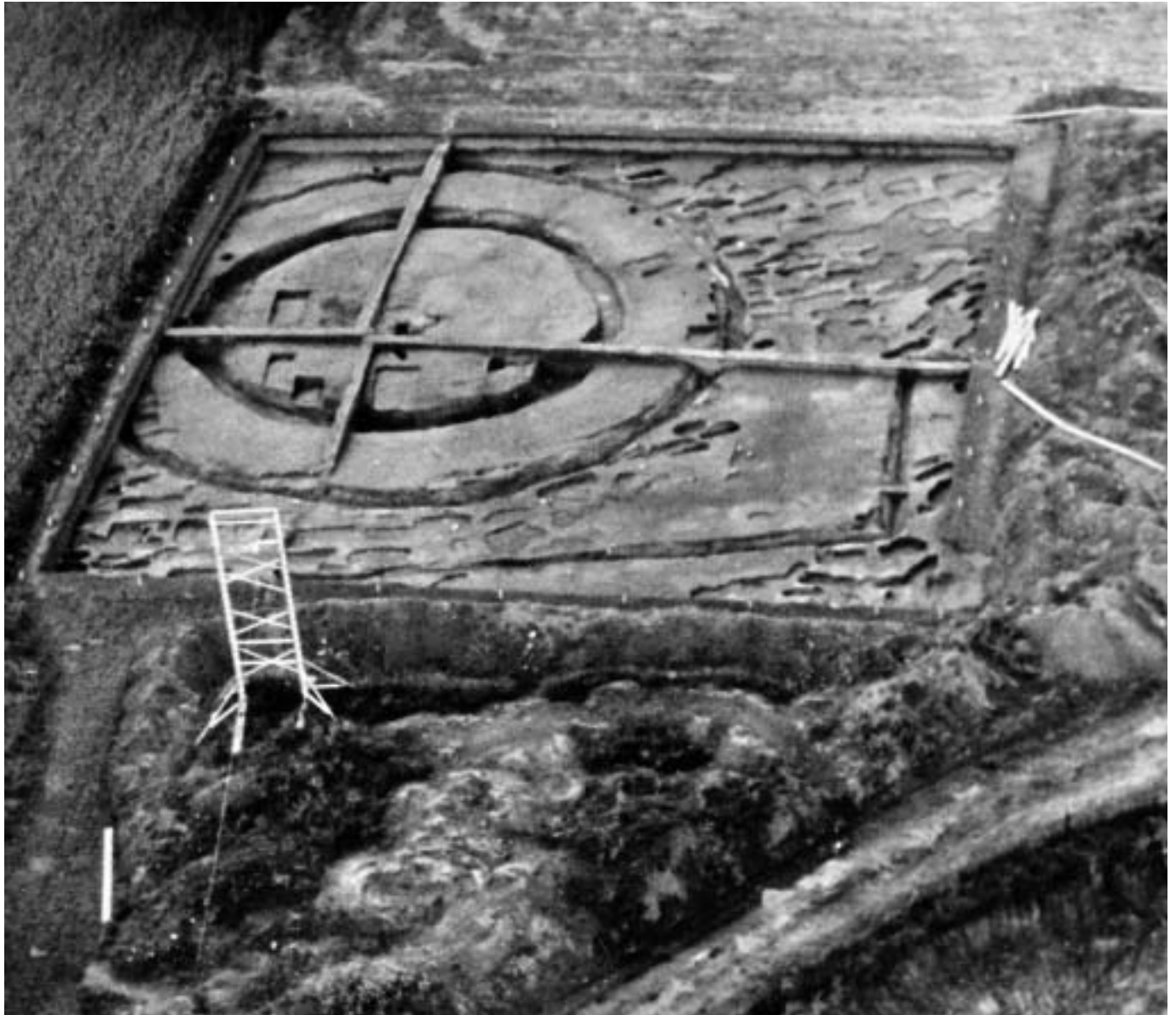
Reconstruction of a sunken hut in Chester. They were workshops rather than living accommodation.

Domesday

The **Domesday Book** is useful for the study of Anglo-Saxon England as it records the owner and assets of an area of land at the time of the Norman conquest in 1066 and again in 1086.

It records a range of settlements , from tiny rural homesteads to villages and important manors.

In Cheshire a number of large estates were held by the Saxon Earl Edwin, including the manors of Macclesfield and Malpas.



Rectangular Saxon graves dug into a circular Bronze Age burial mound at Croft, Warrington. This is a possible Christian burial site.

Religion

The early Christian Church is also a valuable source of information about Anglo-Saxon Cheshire.

No pagan Saxon cemeteries have yet been found in Cheshire, suggesting that they had adopted Christianity by the time Cheshire became part of Mercia.

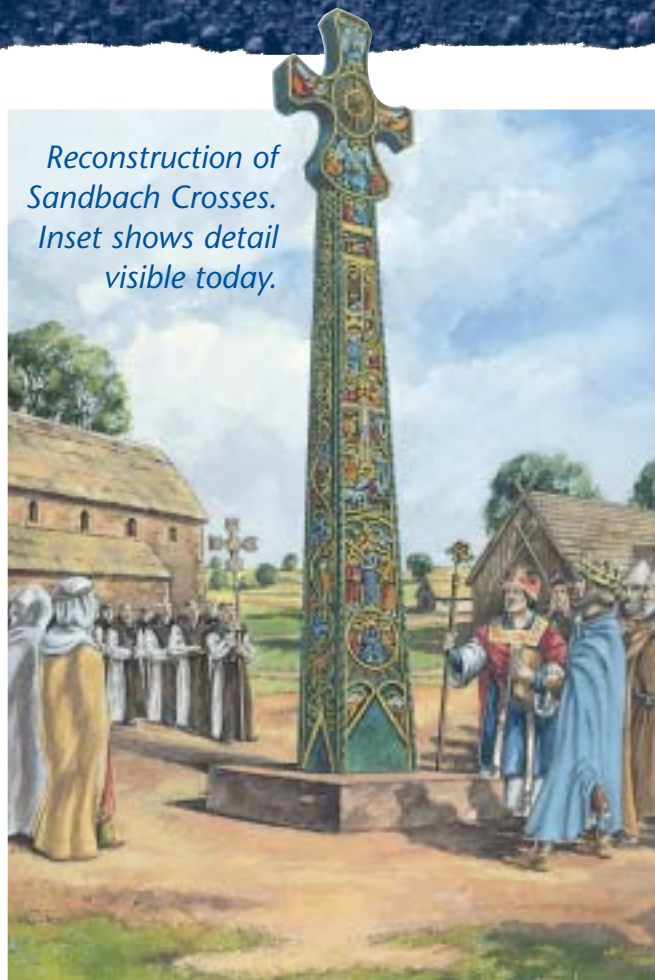
Saxon Stone Crosses

The decorated stone crosses found throughout Cheshire have some of the finest Anglo-Saxon sculpture in Britain.

The Sandbach Crosses

These 9th century stone crosses stand in the market square in Sandbach. They were taken from their original site and broken up in the 17th century, possibly by Puritans. Kept in a number of different places, the fragments were eventually restored in 1816. Both crosses are decorated on all faces with carved figures, animals and vine scrolls. The taller cross has biblical scenes, including the Annunciation, Nativity, Crucifixion and Transfiguration of Christ.

The style and themes of the sculpture indicate contact with the wider Anglo-Saxon world,



Reconstruction of Sandbach Crosses. Inset shows detail visible today.

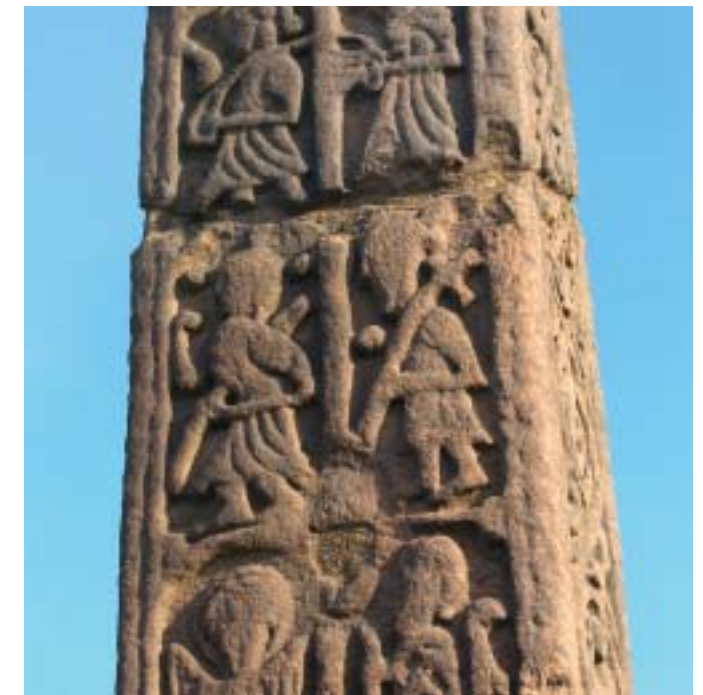
suggesting Sandbach was a significant centre of pre-Viking sculpture in the 9th century.

Saxon Churches in Cheshire

Minsters were centres of the earliest Saxon religious communities and a number of Cheshire churches have early Saxon origins.

The well populated settlement at Chester was home to the minsters of St John the Baptist and St Werburgh. St Werburgh was a 6th century abbess and daughter of a Mercian King.

In Farndon, the church is dedicated to St Chad, a 7th century bishop. Though it does not have any remains of Saxon building, it does have an irregular circular churchyard, a shape associated with early Saxon churches.



Glossary

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

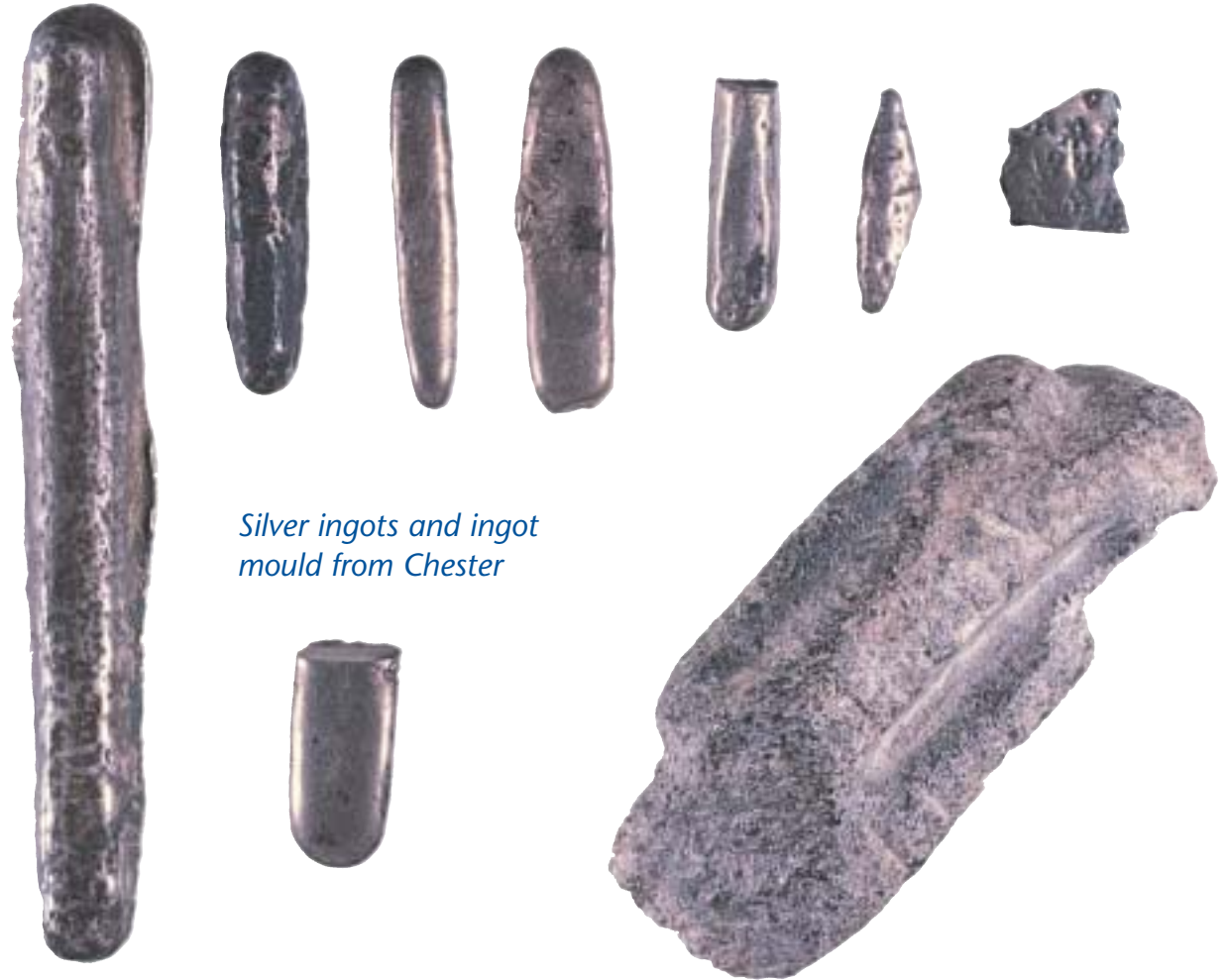
A compilation of a number of different written works that record, year by year, events in Anglo-Saxon and Norman England.

Domesday Book

A survey carried out in 1086 on the orders of William I. It records the owners, tenants and value of land in Norman England.

Hacksilver

Hacksilver is the name given to fragments of silver, cut from much larger pieces, including bracelets and ingots. These pieces could be traded by weight or melted and reused.



Silver ingots and ingot mould from Chester

Sites to Visit

Market Place, Sandbach

Decorated Anglo-Saxon stone crosses.

St Mary's Churchyard, Sandbach

Three fragments of stone cross of similar size and date to the Sandbach crosses. Also two pre-Viking fragments of decorated tomb slabs.

St Mary's & St Helen's Church, Neston

Decorated stone cross shafts showing Viking influence, inside the Church.

St Peter's Church, Prestbury

Fragments of a Saxon cross were found built into the church wall in 1841. They have since been restored and can be seen in the churchyard (*right*).

West Park, Macclesfield

3 Saxon circular pillar crosses can be seen in the playground at West Park, Macclesfield (*far right*). Previously used as gateposts at Ridge Hall, Sutton.

Wirral Museum, Birkenhead

The Saxons had their own form of writing known as Runes. A runic inscription from Overchurch, Wirral is on display.



www.cheshire.gov.uk/archaeology

