Medieval Fact Sheet

Kirkby Stephen, Loki and the Loki Stone

The Loki Stone

Introduction

Kirkby Stephen is a small market town in the Upper Eden valley, but its history connects it to some of the biggest themes in early medieval Britain: the end of Roman rule, the survival of Brittonic kingdoms, the rise of Northumbria, Scandinavian settlement, and the spread of Christianity. Inside the parish church there is a carved stone, probably made in the tenth century, that has become famous far beyond the district. It is usually called the Loki Stone because many people have seen in it a bound figure from Norse legend. Others have argued that it may represent the devil in Christian belief, or perhaps even another figure such as Odin. Whatever answer we prefer, the stone is important because it belongs to a world in which older northern traditions and newer Christian ideas met, mixed, and were reworked into something local and distinctive.

For that reason, the stone is much more than an isolated relic. It gives us a way into the lived experience of a community that stood between worlds. The people who saw the carving when it was new were not museum visitors trying to solve a puzzle from a distance. They were men and women living through major change: new rulers, new settlers, changing languages, new religious loyalties and new ways of understanding the past. A carved stone could speak to all of that at once. It could instruct, warn, commemorate and impress. It could also preserve older imagery in a new setting, allowing familiar stories to survive even as their meaning shifted.

This fact sheet begins with the history of Kirkby Stephen and the Upper Eden valley, because the stone cannot be understood apart from its landscape and community. It then looks at religion in the period, including the meeting between Christianity and older Scandinavian beliefs. After that it turns to Loki himself: the stories told about him, the reasons he is so difficult to define, and the question of how such a figure might appear in art. Only then does it return in detail to the Kirkby Stephen stone and its comparison with the Snaptun stone in Denmark. The aim throughout is not to force a final answer, but to explain why the carving matters and why people continue to admire it, value it and debate it.

Adrian Waite, AW-History, 28 Fletcher Hill Park, Kirkby Stephen, Cumbria. Telephone: 017683-30159. Mobile: 07502-142658. Twitter: @AWHistory E-Mail: Adrian.waite@awics.co.uk. Website: www.aw-history.co.uk

Kirkby Stephen and Upper Eden in the Early Medieval Period

To understand the Loki Stone, it helps to begin with the land in which it was made. The Upper Eden lies between the Pennines and the Lakeland fells, a landscape of river valleys, grazing land, upland routes and scattered settlements. Long before the Viking Age, this region was part of a borderland. After Roman government in Britain collapsed in the early fifth century, the north did not suddenly become empty or lawless. Communities remained in place, and many of them were Brittonic in language and culture. These were the descendants of people who had lived under Roman rule, but who still retained older local identities.

Kirkby Stephen and the Upper Eden viewed from the Nine Standards

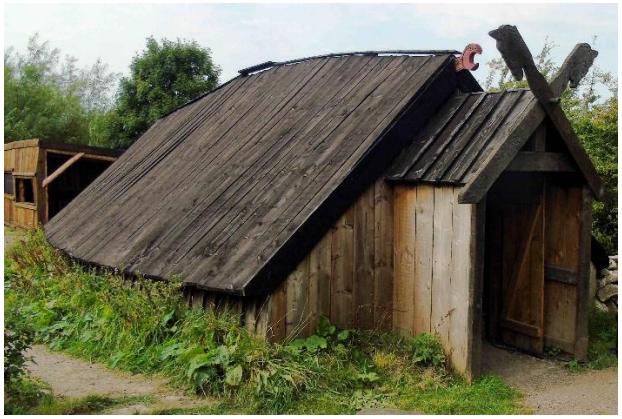
Borderlands are often the most revealing places in history. They are not merely edges of larger kingdoms; they are places where different customs meet, where loyalties can be layered, and where people learn to live with uncertainty. The Upper Eden valley was exactly such a place. Movement through the landscape mattered as much as settlement within it. Routes across Stainmore connected the region to the east, while the valleys and passes to the west opened routes toward the Irish Sea. This meant that ideas as well as goods could travel. Stories, religious practices, artistic styles and family connections all moved through the same landscape.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Upper Eden formed part of the Brittonic political world often linked with the kingdom of Rheged. In time, the kingdom of Strathclyde expanded southward and absorbed territories that had once belonged to Rheged. This meant that the people of the Upper Eden, before English rule took hold, were part of a northern British world that looked both to local strongholds and to wider regional kingship.

The Roman Empire had already brought outside influences into the region. This included soldiers from all parts of the Empire who settled in Cumbria following their discharge from the army. The nearest major Roman military site was at Verterae, now Brough, that guarded an important route across the Pennines. Soldiers, traders and camp followers moved through the district, and some may have stayed. A Roman Cavalry helmet has been found at Crosby Garrett near Kirkby Stephen. Even so, Roman control did not wipe out local identity. Rather, it added another layer to a landscape that remained deeply rooted in native communities.

During the seventh century, the expanding Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria pushed into territories that had previously been ruled by Brittonic elites. Campaigns associated with kings such as Oswald and his successors helped extend Northumbrian influence across much of what later became Cumbria and westwards into Galloway. This did not mean that earlier populations vanished. Far from it: languages, customs and local families continued, but they now lived under changing political masters. The north-west therefore became a zone of cultural overlap, where Brittonic, Anglian and later Scandinavian traditions all left their mark.

From the ninth century onward, Scandinavian settlement transformed many parts of northern and western Britain. In eastern and northern England, Danish power became especially important through the Danelaw and the kingdom of York. At the same time, Norse settlers also moved into the Irish Sea world: from Norway to the western isles, from there to Ireland, and between Ireland, Scotland and north-west England. Some of the people who reached Cumbria were probably what historians call Hiberno-Norse, meaning communities shaped by both Scandinavian and Irish connections. This helps explain why the region can look both English and Irish in character at the same time.



Reconstruction of Viking Age Hall at Moorcroft Viking Centre, Gilcrux, Cumbria.

The name Kirkby Stephen itself is one of the clearest signs of Scandinavian influence. 'Kirkby' comes from Old Norse and means 'village with a church' or 'church settlement'. That is important, because it suggests not just the arrival of Norse-speaking settlers, but a place already recognised as a religious centre, or at least a site of worship, at an early date. It is believed that the first church at Kirkby Stephen may have been built in the mid ninth century.

Neither the church nor the town are dedicated to St. Stephen and there are three explanations as to where the 'Stephen' comes from. First, it could reflect the fact that Stephen of Whitby was Abbot of St. Mary's at York that owned the parish in the eleventh century; the second is that it is a corruption of 'on the Eden' and the third is that it comes from the Anglo-Saxon word 'Stefan' that means a moor. Whatever the exact explanation, the first part of the name strongly suggests that people of Scandinavian descent were established here by the tenth century, and perhaps earlier. In 1090 the town was known as Cherkaby Stephen.

Place-names are one of the best clues we have for the Viking Age in areas where written sources are scarce. A single name cannot tell us everything, but patterns across a whole district can reveal a great deal. In Cumbria and the Eden valley, names drawn from Old Norse are widespread, and that strongly suggests settlement rather than occasional raiding. Such names can point to farms, clearings, valleys, churches and natural landmarks. They show that Scandinavian speech became rooted in the landscape itself. Kirkby Stephen belongs within that wider pattern. Even today, the local map preserves a memory of the languages and identities that shaped the valley over a thousand years ago.

In 927 King Athelstan took control of the kingdom of York, and this is often treated as a major step in the creation of a united English kingdom. Areas such as Westmorland were drawn more firmly into that new political order even though Cumberland remained in Brittonic Strathclyde. Even so, royal control from the south did not erase local customs overnight. The Upper Eden remained a frontier region in many ways, shaped by older traditions, local loyalties and mixed populations. That frontier character is part of what makes the Kirkby Stephen stone so revealing: it belongs to a time when political allegiance, religious identity and cultural memory were all still in motion.

By the tenth century, Kirkby Stephen was not an isolated village at the edge of history. It stood in a region connected to the Irish Sea, to Yorkshire, to the old Brittonic north and to the emerging kingdom of England. Its people may have spoken more than one language over generations and may have carried several cultural traditions at once. That is the historical setting in which the Loki Stone was carved.

There is also a deeper continuity to remember. The wider district had been occupied long before the Viking Age, with prehistoric activity, Roman military presence and early medieval settlement all leaving traces. This mattered because people in the tenth century were not building on empty ground. They were inheriting places already marked by memory. An old hill, a burial site, a ruined wall or a long-used route could shape how later communities thought about sacred space. A church site with carved stones was therefore part of a much longer history of people investing this landscape with meaning.

Religion, Conversion and the Mixed World of Early Medieval Faith

Religion in early medieval Upper Eden was never a simple matter of one faith replacing another in a single moment. Christianity had deep roots among the Brittonic peoples of the north. Even before Scandinavian settlement, Christian ideas, symbols and burial customs were already part of local life in many places. The Angles of Northumbria, by contrast, had once followed the same older northern religion as the Vikings but converted during the seventh century. King Oswald, one of the best-known rulers linked to Northumbria's expansion, was remembered as a Christian king and later honoured as a saint.

Scandinavian settlers brought with them their own traditional religion, usually called Old Norse religion. This religion was not organised like a modern church. It had no single holy book and no central authority. It was made up of stories, rituals, sacred places, seasonal feasts and shared understandings about gods, ancestors, fate and the natural world. Its chief gods were Odin, Thor and Freya.

Odin depicted in an eighteenth century Icelandic manuscript

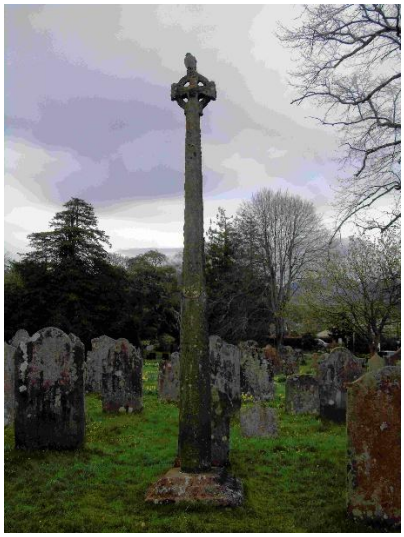
Settlers in Britain did not remain untouched by Christianity. Over time many converted, and in some regions, conversion seems to have happened quite quickly among local elites, with older beliefs lingering alongside the new religion for generations. Conversion was not just a matter of theology. It involved identity, community ties and political advantage. Accepting Christianity could connect local leaders to powerful neighbours, kings and church institutions. It could also give access to literacy, prestige objects and burial customs that signalled status.

The old religion was a polytheistic religion, and it is common for people with polytheistic beliefs to be able to accept a new god without rejecting the old ones. Abandoning older practices entirely may have felt unnecessary or even impossible. Many families probably carried old beliefs in memory while outwardly embracing new religious forms. That is one reason why mixed imagery on sculpture should not surprise us.

Before parish churches were established in stone, early Christians often worshipped around crosses and meeting places outdoors. Stone crosses could mark prayer sites, burial grounds or places where local communities gathered. In northern England many of these carvings survive only in fragments, but they tell us a great deal. They show that sculpture was an important way of teaching belief, marking sacred space and expressing identity. In the north-west, some carvings carry unmistakably Christian symbols, while others seem to draw on themes known from Scandinavian story and art.

Stone sculpture was especially useful in communities where many people could not read. Images on crosses and cross-shafts worked like sermons in carved form. They could remind viewers of biblical stories, saints, judgment, protection and salvation. At the same time, ornament itself carried meaning. Interlace, beasts and framed figures could suggest order, struggle and the controlled power of sacred art. To modern viewers some of this symbolism is hard to recover, but for early medieval communities it would have formed part of an understood visual language, especially in and around places of worship.

Examples from Cumbria and neighbouring areas show how mixed this artistic world could be. At Gosforth, for instance, a famous stone cross combines clearly Christian imagery with scenes that many scholars connect to Norse myth. This does not necessarily mean that everyone looking at the cross believed the same thing. Rather, it suggests that carvers and patrons were working in a shared visual language that could speak to communities with layered identities. Images could carry more than one meaning at once, and that may have been part of their power.



The Gosforth Cross

Gosforth is not important because it gives a simple key to every other monument, but because it shows what was possible in this region. A Christian cross in a Scandinavian-influenced community could include imagery that modern scholars connect with Ragnarök, the binding of Loki and other mythic scenes, while still functioning as a Christian monument. That tells us that carvers and patrons did not see a sharp boundary where modern readers sometimes do. They were able to use old narrative material to express new religious ideas. Kirkby Stephen should be read in that same context.

Conversion should not be imagined as a clean break between ‘pagan’ and ‘Christian’ worlds. In practice, people could adopt baptism, build churches and honour Christian holy days while still remembering older stories and symbols. Carvers might reuse familiar motifs in new settings. Church sites could stand where earlier sacred activity had taken place. The result was not confusion so much as adaptation. Communities translated belief into forms that made sense to them.

It is in this context that the Kirkby Stephen Loki Stone becomes so important. Most scholars place it broadly in the tenth century, between about 900 and 1000. That was exactly the period when Scandinavian settlement, Christian practice and local identity were overlapping in the Upper Eden. The carving is therefore not just an isolated curiosity. It is evidence for the way a frontier community imagined sacred history, danger, evil and divine power.

Society and Economy in Tenth-Century Upper Eden

What sort of place was Kirkby Stephen in the tenth century? We should be cautious, because the written evidence is thin, but archaeology, placenames and comparison with similar regions give us a broad picture. This was a rural society based above all on farming. Families depended on mixed agriculture, with livestock playing a major role in the uplands. Cattle, sheep and perhaps horses were all valuable. Fields close to settlement were used for crops, while wider pasture and common land supported grazing. Much of life revolved around seasonal work, food storage, movement of animals and the maintenance of kinship ties.

Daily life was physically demanding. Homes were heated by open hearths, food had to be grown, gathered or stored against winter, tools had to be repaired, and travel could be slow and difficult. Children learned work early. Women, men and older children all contributed to the household economy in different ways, and survival depended on cooperation. Seasonal rhythms governed the year: lambing, haymaking, harvest, slaughtering and the management of fuel and fodder. Such a world left little room for the modern separation between the ordinary and the spiritual. Belief was part of work, weather, sickness and hope.

A re-enactor depicts a Viking age bowyer

Society was organised around households, extended families and local leaders rather than large urban institutions. Kirkby Stephen may have been a focus for worship, exchange and gathering, but it would still have looked very different from a later medieval town. Instead of dense streets and stone-fronted shops, there was probably a looser settlement pattern, timber buildings, tracks rather than paved roads, and a landscape in which the church site stood out as a special and perhaps ancient centre. Kirkby Stephen may already have had local importance because of its position on routes through the valley and across the Pennines.

Although rural, the district was not cut off. People moved for trade, for seasonal grazing, for marriage alliances, for legal business and for worship. Pack animals and drove routes linked upland communities to wider markets. Metalwork, quern-stones, cloth, salt and other necessities circulated through networks that were larger than any one village. Kirkby Stephen may therefore have been both local and regional in importance: a place where people gathered, exchanged news and encountered ideas from outside the valley.

Re-enactors depict a Viking age battle

This was also a warrior society. That does not mean that everyone spent all day fighting, but status, honour and the ability to defend land and people mattered greatly. Weapons carried symbolic value as well as practical use. Stories of heroes, kings and feuds shaped ideas of proper behaviour. For example, Christians enjoyed hearing about the exploits of the pagan hero Beowulf, who fought monsters and dragons. In such a society, religion was not cut off from daily life. Beliefs about fate, luck, divine favour and the struggle against hostile forces were woven into the way people understood both farming and warfare.

Subsistence farming demanded resilience. Weather, animal disease and poor harvests could be devastating. Communities had to be adaptable, and belief systems that emphasised uncertainty, threat and the need for protection felt immediately relevant. A carved figure bound threatened or defeated would not only have referred to a story. It could also have expressed a deeper hope that disorder might be restrained and that evil, however understood, could be held in check.

This helps to explain why carved monuments could carry emotional force. A bound or defeated threatening figure was not merely decorative. It could offer reassurance that danger, chaos or evil had limits. In a community facing illness, loss, uncertain harvests and the constant possibility of dispute, the image of hostile power held fast would have been meaningful. Whether the figure was understood as Loki, the devil or some other adversary, the act of restraint itself could be important.

If we picture Kirkby Stephen in the tenth century, we should imagine a settlement modest in size but important in meaning. It may have contained a worship site marked by crosses before any large stone church existed. Nearby were farmsteads, enclosed plots, grazing land and routeways linking the valley to wider regions. People coming here would have brought news, stories and goods. Some may have traced their ancestry to local Britons, some to Northumbrian settlers, some to Scandinavian incomers, and many probably to families already mixed in culture and background. The Loki Stone belongs to this world of contact, adaptation and memory.

Loki and the Old Northern Religion

The religion brought by Scandinavian settlers is often called Norse mythology, but for the people who practised it, it was simply part of life. It offered an understanding of how the world was structured, who the divine powers were, and what place human beings held in a larger cosmic order. At its centre was a universe made up of different realms linked by the world tree, usually called Yggdrasil in later sources. Gods, giants, humans and the dead all had their place within this order. Fate mattered deeply. Even the gods were not fully beyond it, and many myths relate how the world is moving toward a final catastrophe, Ragnarök, after which a renewed world may appear.

Among the best-known gods were Odin, Thor and Freyja. Odin was associated with wisdom, poetry, war, magic and kingship. He was a seeker after knowledge, but his search came at a cost. Thor was the great defender, linked with thunder, strength and the protection of gods and humans against hostile forces. Freyja was associated with desire, wealth, beauty, magic and the dead. Other important figures included Freyr, connected with peace and fertility; Tyr, remembered for courage and law; and Frigg, associated with marriage, motherhood and foresight.

Practice varied from place to place. Offerings might be made at halls, groves, burial sites or specially chosen natural places. Feasting was important. So too were spoken tradition, poetry and memory. The German monk, Adam of Bremen, tells us that Uppsala in Sweden is the main centre of the religion where ceremonies and sacrifices take place. There may have been local religious specialists, but belief was not separated from family, farming or leadership. The gods were honoured for protection, success and fertility, but they were not always morally simple. Norse myths are full of clever bargains, broken promises, violence, humour and uncertainty.

Loki as depicted in an eighteenth century Icelandic manuscript

Loki is one of the most complex figures in this religious world. He is not a straightforward god of evil in the later Christian sense, nor is he simply a comic trickster. In the surviving Norse sources, he is clever, dangerous, witty, unpredictable and often deeply disruptive. Sometimes he helps the gods out of trouble, and at other times he causes the trouble in the first place. He crosses boundaries repeatedly: between friend and enemy, between male and female roles, between human-like intelligence and monstrous consequence. For that reason, he has fascinated readers for centuries.

Later medieval Icelandic texts describe Loki as the son of the giant Fárbauti and that his mother is Laufey or Nál. He is closely associated with the gods, especially Odin and Thor, yet he is also tied to the giants, the beings who often stand outside divine order. This divided allegiance is central to his character. He belongs and does not belong. He can move between worlds, but he never sits comfortably in any one of them.

One difficulty in discussing Loki is that the surviving stories were written down long after many of the events and artworks they are used to explain. The poets and compilers who preserved these myths lived in Christian Iceland, not in Viking-Age Cumbria. That does not make the stories worthless, but it does mean we must be careful. Some details may have changed over time. Others may have been shaped by later literary taste or by Christian ideas about sin and punishment. However, it is also believed that medieval Iceland had a strong and long-standing tradition of using oral history and these sources may be reliable.

Stories of Loki

Most of what people know about Loki comes from texts written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century, especially the Poetic Edda and Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda. These are later than the Viking Age and must be used carefully, but they preserve traditions that are often much older. Several stories are especially relevant when thinking about the Kirkby Stephen and Snaptun stones.

Loki's parentage already points to his ambiguous place in myth. His father is a giant, and many of his strongest ties are to the giants. That matters because the giants are not just monsters in Norse story; they are ancient powers who often stand for threat, wildness and opposition to the gods. Loki moves between these worlds and sometimes seems to bring giant chaos directly into the divine community.

One famous tale begins with mischief. Loki cuts off the golden hair of Sif, the wife of Thor. Furious, Thor threatens him, and Loki must make amends. He goes to the dwarfs, master smiths of myth, and persuades them to create new hair of gold for Sif. In the same cycle of stories, he is also responsible for the making of several great treasures, including Odin's spear and Thor's hammer. This story shows Loki as both troublemaker and problem-solver.

That same set of stories leads to the episode that matters most for the Snaptun stone – a Loki stone that survives in Denmark. Loki wagers his head against the skill of the dwarf craftsmen. He loses. When they come to collect, he tries to escape by clever argument, saying they may take his head but not his neck. In response, the dwarfs sew his lips shut instead. This image of the silenced Loki is highly unusual and is one reason why the face on the Snaptun stone, with marked lips, is so often identified as him.

Loki addresses the other gods at a feast in a Viking age hall

Another key text is the poem usually known in English as ‘Loki’s Quarrel’, or ‘Lokasenna’. In this story Loki arrives at a feast of the gods and insults them one by one, exposing secrets, accusing them of shameful behaviour and turning celebration into hostility. The poem is witty, sharp and uncomfortable. Loki appears as the figure who says what should not be said and who breaks the peace simply by speaking. At the end, he cannot maintain this challenge forever, and later tradition links the episode to his punishment.

This aspect of Loki is worth stressing because speech mattered greatly in early medieval northern society. Reputation, oath-taking, insult and public accusation all had real consequences. A figure who used words to humiliate, divide and dishonour others was genuinely dangerous. Loki is often frightening not because he is physically the strongest figure in myth, but because he destabilises community from within. He knows secrets, exploits weakness and turns social order into conflict. That helps explain why later punishment stories focus so strongly on his capture and restraint.

The death of Baldr is the turning point in Loki’s story. Baldr, beloved and bright, is a son of Odin and seems protected from harm because all things in the world have sworn not to hurt him. Loki discovers that mistletoe has been overlooked. He tricks Baldr’s blind brother Höðr into throwing a mistletoe weapon, which kills Baldr. This act destroys trust among the gods and sets the stage for Loki’s final punishment. In many later tellings, it is for Baldr’s death that Loki is bound. Some early Christians found similarities between the story of Baldr and the story of Christ.

The death of Baldr depicted in an eighteenth century Icelandic manuscript

Loki is also linked to monstrous offspring. With the giantess Angrboða he fathers Fenrir the wolf, Jörmungandr the world-serpent, and Hel, ruler of the dead. Each of these children plays a part in cosmic danger and in Ragnarök. They extend Loki’s role beyond personal mischief into something much larger: he becomes connected with forces that threaten the order of the world itself. Some early Christians found similarities between Loki and the Christian devil.

After Baldr’s death and as the gods close in on him, Loki tries to escape. One tradition says he invents the fishing net and then uses it while hiding in the form of a salmon. The gods catch him, nevertheless. This story is striking because it turns human skill against its own maker: Loki is trapped by a device he himself created. Some scholars have noted that medieval Christian writers also liked images in which evil is caught in its own snare.

Loki's punishment is one of the darkest scenes in Norse myth. He is bound to three stones with the entrails of Narfi, one of his sons and put underground with a serpent placed above him that drips venom. Loki's human wife, Sigyn, protects him by collecting the venom in a bowl but when she goes to empty the bowl the venom drips on Loki making him writhe in pain causing earthquakes. However, Loki is destined to break free from his chains at Ragnarok (the ending of the world) to cause havoc for both the gods and men before finally being killed by the gods. This image of the bound sufferer is probably the most obvious reason why people have connected certain carvings to him. The Gosforth Cross, for example, shows Loki with the serpent, his wife and a bowl.

A nineteenth century depiction of Loki bound to the stone, Sigyn and the serpent

Taken together, these stories show why Loki could be so useful in art. He could stand for cunning, disorder, punishment, dangerous speech, broken community and cosmic threat. Yet because he was also familiar and memorable, he could be adapted into new visual settings, including Christian ones.

Loki in Early Medieval Art and Christian Thought

Clear early medieval depictions of Loki are extremely rare. That rarity is one reason the Kirkby Stephen and Snaptun stones attract so much attention. The Snaptun stone from Denmark is widely treated as the best candidate for a carved image of Loki because of the stitched lips. The Kirkby Stephen figure, by contrast, is identified through its bound posture and the general resemblance to stories of Loki's punishment. Beyond these examples, scholars have sometimes proposed other possible images, but there is rarely agreement. Viking-Age art often works through hints rather than labels, and the same image may be read in several ways.

Direct early medieval Christian references to Loki are also limited, but the broader relationship between Norse myth and Christian interpretation is important. Later medieval writers such as Snorri Sturluson wrote about Loki in a Christian world, and some scholars argue that parts of his presentation may have been shaped by Christian ideas about evil, entrapment and final judgment. In places where Scandinavian settlers were converting, older mythic figures could also be reinterpreted. A figure known in one setting as Loki might in another setting be used to suggest the devil, sin, or evil bound by divine power. This kind of overlap is central to the debate about the Kirkby Stephen carving.

How to Read a Carved Stone

Before turning back to the Kirkby Stephen carving itself, it is worth asking how early medieval sculpture is interpreted at all. Stones do not come with labels, and many survive only as fragments. Weathering, breakage, reuse in later buildings and changes in scholarly fashion all affect what people think they are seeing. A figure that appears clearly defined in an old drawing may now be worn and difficult to read. A feature interpreted as a rope, horn, beast or crack can lead to very different conclusions. Good interpretation therefore depends not only on imagination but on close comparison, knowledge of style, and willingness to accept uncertainty.

Detail from a tenth century prayer cross in Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire.

Context matters just as much as the carving itself. The Kirkby Stephen figure was probably part of a cross shaft rather than an isolated sculpture. That means it once stood within a larger monument that probably included other scenes above and below it. If so, we are judging a single surviving panel without the full programme that originally framed it. The missing parts may have made the meaning much clearer. This is why arguments about the figure's identity remain open. We are trying to reconstruct a message from only part of the original monument.

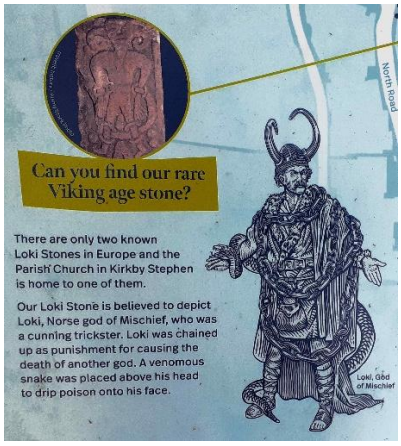
The Kirkby Stephen Loki Stone

The stone in Kirkby Stephen parish church is a carved fragment, probably once part of an Anglo-Scandinavian cross shaft. It is made of local yellowish-white sandstone, is rectangular and about one metre high. It shows a standing human-like figure facing the viewer. The body is broad-shouldered, the arms hang down, and the figure appears to be constrained by a circular band or binding around the body and legs. The face is marked by simple but forceful features including a pointed beard, and there are curved projections beside the head that have often been described as horns. The sides of the stone carry plait or scroll ornament, linking it to the wider tradition of early medieval carved stone crosses in northern England. It has been dated to the early tenth century but may be earlier.

The stone was discovered built into the fabric of the church during restoration in 1870. This means that by that date its original setting had long since been forgotten. Like many early medieval fragments, it survived because later builders reused it rather than destroying it. Reuse was common. Old carved stones might be valued as useful building material, as curiosities, or simply as pieces of local stone already to hand. Their survival is therefore often accidental. In one sense this is fortunate; in another, it means that the original monument and its exact position are lost to us. Several other stones of the early medieval period were found built into the fabric of the church at the same time (see below).

Its significance is enormous. If it really is Loki, it would be one of only two early medieval images of that figure anywhere in Europe. Even if it is not Loki, it remains a rare and important witness to the religious imagination of tenth-century Cumbria. It shows that local sculpture was not merely decorative. It was engaged with major questions about belief, danger and salvation, and it did so in a style understandable to a mixed Anglo-Scandinavian community.

Its style places it within the broad world of Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture in northern England, where carvers combined inherited Christian monument forms with motifs familiar in Viking-Age art. The body shape, frontal presentation and ornamental side panels all fit this environment. Yet the figure also has an arresting individuality. It confronts the viewer directly. The hanging hands, fixed stance and facial emphasis give it a grim stillness. It does not look heroic or triumphant. Instead, it appears pinned, held, exposed to view. That visual force helps explain why the carving has held attention for so long.



Loki depicted on a modern tourist information sign in Kirkby Stephen

The traditional interpretation sees the carving as Loki bound in punishment. This reading focuses on the restrained posture and on the broader story in which Loki is captured after engineering Baldr's death. Because the figure appears trapped and possibly threatened, many viewers have thought the identification convincing. The popularity of the name 'Loki Stone' shows how strongly this reading has taken hold in public imagination.

Even so, the Loki interpretation has limits. The scene lacks some of the details that later readers might expect from the fullest version of the punishment story, such as the serpent above Loki's head or Sigyn holding a bowl. That does not disprove the identification, since artists often selected only part of a story, but it does mean caution is needed. We should not assume that every bound figure in a Scandinavian style must be Loki. The identification is plausible, memorable and culturally powerful, but it remains an interpretation rather than a certainty.

And there are serious alternatives. One argument is that the figure may represent the bound devil in the book of revelation rather than Loki. In this view, the carver used a visual language familiar to Scandinavian settlers to express a Christian message: evil has been captured and restrained. A related possibility is that modern viewers have been too quick to label any bound Norse-looking figure as Loki. More recently, some have even suggested Odin as a possible identification, noting features such as damage around one eye and questioning whether the supposed bindings and horns have been understood correctly. None of these readings can be proved beyond doubt. What matters is that the ambiguity itself seems historically meaningful. The carving may have been designed to work across more than one set of ideas. As one historian put it: 'The stone could have been Loki on Tuesday, the bound devil on Thursday and someone else on Saturday' – the result either of different interpretations or the deliberate intention of the carver.

The “bound devil” interpretation refers in broad terms to Christian ideas found in the Book of Revelation, where Satan is seized, chained and held powerless for a time before final judgment. Medieval Christians were very familiar with the idea that evil could be subdued by divine authority. In sculpture and preaching alike, images of defeated monsters, trampled serpents and restrained devils carried a clear message: Christ triumphs and evil fails. If the Kirkby Stephen figure belongs in this tradition, then its Norse-looking features may have helped translate Christian teaching into a local visual form.

This reading has a strong practical logic. If a tenth-century Christian carver in a Scandinavian-influenced district wanted to show evil overcome, the most effective image might not have been a figure taken from Mediterranean Christian art. It might have been a figure drawn from the visual habits and mythic memory of the local population. In that case, the carving does not need to be ‘either Loki or the devil’ in the modern sense. It could have used the appearance of one to communicate the nature of the other. Such overlap is exactly what makes frontier art so interesting.

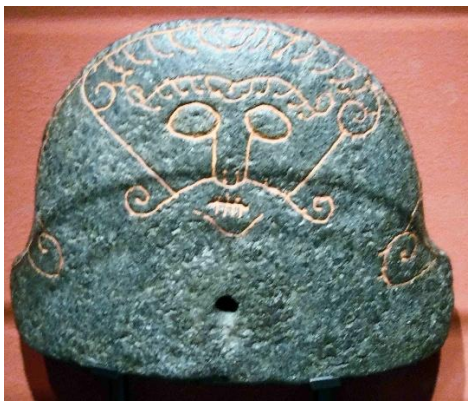
The debate matters because it changes how we understand conversion in the Viking Age. If the figure is Loki, then we may be looking at a survival or reuse of Norse myth within a Christian monument. If it is the devil, then we may be looking at a Christian monument that deliberately borrows the look of older northern imagery. If it is Odin or some other figure, that would raise yet more questions about memory and meaning. In every case, the stone points to a community in which religious ideas were being negotiated rather than passively received.

The question also matters in public history because names shape how monuments are remembered. To call the object the ‘Loki Stone’ invites visitors to see it through Norse mythology first. To call it the ‘Bound Devil’ places it more firmly in a Christian interpretive frame. Both labels are meaningful, and both influence how residents and visitors imagine the past. The continuing debate is therefore not just academic. It affects heritage, tourism and local identity as well as scholarship.

The ‘Loki stone’ is currently facing the south door in the church. However, the church plans to relocate the stone in a purpose-built display case, housed in a replica prayer cross.

The Snaptun Stone in Denmark

The ‘Loki Stone’ most often mentioned alongside that of Kirkby Stephen is the Snaptun stone from Denmark, found near Horsens Fjord and now housed in the Moesgaard museum in Aarhus. This object is smaller and different in function from the Kirkby Stephen stone: it has been identified as a carved stone connected with a smith’s hearth or bellows. It carries a face rather than a full standing figure, and the most striking feature is the mouth, which appears marked or sewn shut.



The Snaptun Loki Stone

The identification of the Snaptun face as Loki rests on the story in which dwarfs sew his lips after he loses a wager. That connection is stronger than the case for Kirkby Stephen because the stitched mouth is such a distinctive detail. The stone is important not only because it may show Loki, but also because it places him in a smithing context. That is appropriate, since the story of the sewn lips belongs to a tale about dwarf craftsmanship and forged treasures. The Snaptun object therefore links myth, craft and daily life in a vivid way.

The object's practical function also deserves attention. Because it was apparently connected with a hearth or bellows, it reminds us that mythological imagery was not confined to grand monuments. It could appear in craft settings and in the ordinary spaces of skilled work. This suits Loki rather well. He is repeatedly entangled with smiths, wagers, tricks and the making of powerful objects. The Snaptun stone therefore places mythology close to the working world of artisans, where storytelling, craft knowledge and symbolic imagery could meet.

Re-enactors with a replica blacksmith's forge showing the use of a hearth stone

The similarities between the Kirkby Stephen and Snaptun stones are easy to see. Both are rare carved images connected, at least by common interpretation, with Loki. Both come from the Viking Age or its immediate aftermath. Both preserve a figure marked by restraint or injury rather than by triumph. And both have become central to wider discussions about how Norse myth was pictured in the early medieval world.

The differences are just as important. The Snaptun stone is from Scandinavia itself and seems closely tied to one very specific mythic episode: the sewing of Loki's lips. The Kirkby Stephen carving is from an Anglo-Scandinavian Christian environment and forms part of a cross-shaft tradition. Its meaning is therefore broader and less certain. One stone points to a particular story; the other may express a larger argument about evil, punishment and the meeting of religions. In that sense, Snaptun helps us identify a possible iconographic model, while Kirkby Stephen shows how such imagery could be transformed in the British Isles.

Seen together with monuments such as the Gosforth Cross, the two stones suggest a wider pattern rather than a one-off curiosity. Scandinavian mythic material could be carved in different settings and for different purposes: on a craft object in Denmark, on a major Christian cross in Cumbria, and perhaps on a cross-shaft fragment at Kirkby Stephen. The imagery did not stand still. It travelled, adapted and took on local meanings. That wider pattern makes the Kirkby Stephen stone more, not less, significant, even if its exact identity cannot be pinned down.

Other Early Medieval Stones in Kirkby Stephen

The other early medieval stones that have been found in Kirkby Stephen parish church include two pieces of a late eighth century cross-shaft carved with a large-scale scroll; and two pieces of a tenth century cross or possibly some other furnishing, half columnar in section. There is a tenth century hogback tomb that is undecorated.

There are two fragments of a semi-cylindrical shaft with part of one arm of crosshead (60centimetres by 25centimetres by 12centimetres), front with band of interlace flanked by bands of scroll-ornament, flat back with panel of interlacement, probably of the tenth century.

The Hog-Back Gravestone

Other stones that survive include:

- Part of a wheel crosshead with interlacement of the tenth century
- Part of plain wheel crosshead, with a round boss in middle, probably of the tenth century
- Part of crosshead with extended arms and linear ornament enclosing a central boss and smaller bosses on the arms, probably of the eighth to ninth century
- A hog-back stone with a gabled top cut to represent tiles and traces of scrolled ornament on sides, probably of the eleventh century. These gravestones were designed to resemble Viking-age longhouses.

The other stones that have been found are displayed at the foot of the church tower.

Conclusion

The Kirkby Stephen Loki Stone matters because it stands at the crossroads of several histories at once. It belongs to a landscape shaped by Brittonic roots, Anglo-Saxon Northumbrian expansion, Scandinavian settlement and English kingship. It comes from a period when Christianity was spreading, yet older northern stories remained meaningful. It may show Loki; it may show the devil in a Scandinavian visual style; it may preserve some other figure altogether. But whatever answer you prefer, the stone is evidence of creative cultural exchange.

Perhaps the most important conclusion is this: the people of tenth-century Kirkby Stephen were not living in a neat divide between ‘pagan past’ and ‘Christian future’. They lived in a world where stories, symbols and loyalties overlapped. The Loki Stone captures that overlap in a single compelling image. It invites us to think not only about who is shown in the carving, but also about how communities make sense of change. That is why this fragment of stone, preserved in a parish church in Upper Eden, has significance far beyond its size.

It also reminds us that small places can preserve evidence of very large historical processes. In one carved fragment at Kirkby Stephen, we encounter the aftermath of Rome, the persistence of Brittonic communities, the spread of Anglo-Saxon Northumbrian power, Scandinavian migration, the conversion of the north and the making of local identity in a frontier valley. Few monuments bring so many themes together so vividly. That is why the stone deserves to be known not only as a local curiosity, but as an object of national and international importance.

Adrian Waite
May 2026

The Kirkby Stephen Loki Festival in May 2026

Further Reading

- For Kirkby Stephen itself, start with the local history pages of Kirkby Stephen Parish Church and the town history material produced by local heritage groups.
- For early medieval sculpture, the ‘Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture’ is one of the most useful resources, especially for stones from Cumbria and neighbouring counties.
- For wider background on Viking-Age Cumbria, works on Scandinavian settlement in north-west England and the Irish Sea world are especially helpful.
- For comparison with other monuments, look at the Gosforth Cross, which is one of the most discussed examples of mixed Christian and Norse imagery in Britain.
- For Loki and Norse myth more generally, accessible translations or retellings of the ‘Poetic Edda’ and Snorri Sturluson’s ‘Prose Edda’ remain essential starting points.
- For Danish comparison material, the Snaptun stone is often discussed in museum and educational resources on Viking-Age art.
- Readers who want a more scholarly approach can also explore studies of conversion, iconography and Anglo-Scandinavian art in northern England, many of which discuss how older mythic themes were adapted in Christian settings.

Webinar

Kirkby Stephen, Loki and the Loki Stone

This webinar will be held at 7.00pm on Tuesday 26th May 2026 and will last for about an hour. The presenter will be Adrian Waite. There is no charge for attending the webinar.

To register, please click here.

https://event.webinarjam.com/0zz8o/register/qpp50u88

For further information or to view the recording if you miss the live event, please visit: AW History (aw-history.co.uk)