



## An Ivory Staff Terminal from Alcester

One Object by **Sandy Heslop**

WORD COUNT:573

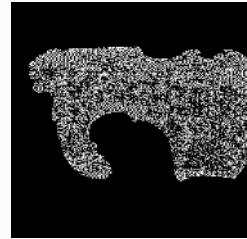


Figure 1

Unknown maker, *Ivory Staff Terminal from Alcester (front and back)*, 11th Century, ivory, 14 × 5 cm. Collection of the British Museum (1903,0323.1). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

The Alcester staff terminal is an outstanding example of late Anglo-Saxon carving on a small scale. It was supposedly discovered in 1873 in the garden of the rectory at Alcester (Warwickshire) and comes from a pastoral staff that would have belonged to a bishop or abbot. An abbey was founded at Alcester in 1140 and the first abbot appointed from Worcester in that year. Worcester could have been the source of the staff, which may be dated c. 1030–60, when it was a significant artistic centre. The form is unusual, with a pair of volutes rather than a single spiral or crook. There is one other complete example of the same type in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, which dates to about a century later (c. 1150), and fragments of two others, also twelfth-century—both in the British Museum. All are made of walrus ivory, and use the maximum width of the tusk, in this case about 52 millimetres. Characteristic of all four examples is lush foliage carved on the sides of the volutes. Beasts' heads also feature on the two complete terminals; Alcester is the more complex, with gaping mouths on the shoulders as well as a griffin's head on the tip of the surviving spiral. The outer enamel of the tusk takes detail better than the inner dentine of the core, so as much as possible of the finest carving is kept close to the surface. This form of the upper terminal for a bishop's or abbot's pastoral staff seems to have been invented in Britain, probably with the size of a walrus tusk as a determining factor.



Figure 2

Unknown maker, *Ivory Staff Terminal from Alcester (front and back)*, 11th Century, ivory, 14 × 5 cm. Collection of the British Museum (1903,0323.1). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum.

The central images of the Alcester terminal show the Crucifixion on one side and Christ trampling the lion and the dragon (Psalm 91:13) on the other. He is shown there holding a cross staff with which he pierces the lion. This alludes to the role of a pastoral staff in “correcting vice”, and suggests that the two volutes should also be read as the arms of the Cross and providing the pastor’s ultimate authority through Christ’s Passion. Traces of gold are still to be seen on the Cross and in the deep recesses between the foliage and most probably originally defined the background to most of the carvings. Many small nails, and the holes made by them, suggest there were other additions, and it has been plausibly suggested that small coloured beads may have been attached through the drilled holes on the outer edges of the spirals.<sup>1</sup>

The identifying characteristic of the terminals is a double volute with the staff itself passing through a socket between the two. This is wider at the base (17–18 millimetres) than at the top (11 millimetres). It is likely that the upper extension of the staff emerged to support a knop of some kind, perhaps in rock crystal or another piece of walrus ivory, fixed in the centre. The effect is like a pair of leaves curling in opposite directions away from the central stem with a “flower” between them. That was no doubt intentional, for it alludes to the divine revelation that Aaron was to be the Israelites’ first high priest. The miracle was that Aaron’s rod was placed in the Tabernacle overnight and in the morning had brought forth flowers and almonds—*amigdalas* (Numbers 17:1–9). Another characteristic of Aaron’s rod was that it turned into a serpent which devoured the rod-serpents of Pharaoh’s magicians (Exodus 7:10–12).<sup>2</sup>

## About the author

Sandy Heslop is Professor of Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, where he has worked as a teacher and researcher since 1976. He publishes widely on the art and architecture of medieval England from around 1000 to the Reformation. Recent research interests include studies on St Anselm’s Canterbury (in *Anglo-Norman Studies*, the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, and the BAA Canterbury Conference Transactions). His main project at present is the medieval parish churches of Norwich, funded for three years by the Leverhulme Trust: [norwichmedievalchurches.org](http://norwichmedievalchurches.org). Publications on other topics include a book on the Eadwine Psalter, another on Norwich Castle Keep, and an exhibition and catalogue: *Basketry: Making Human Nature*.

## Footnotes

1. Leslie Webster, in *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art, 966–1066*, ed. Janet Backhouse, D. H. Turner, and Leslie Webster (London: British Museum, 1984), cat. no. 120.
2. T. A. Heslop, “Towards an Iconology of Crosiers”, in *Studies in Medieval Art and Architecture Presented to Peter Lasko*, ed. D. Buckton and T. A. Heslop (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994), 36–45.

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Backhouse, Janet, D. H. Turner, and Leslie Webster, eds. *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art, 966–1066*. London: British Museum, 1984.

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## Imprint

Author	Sandy Heslop
Date	29 June 2017
Category	<a href="#">One Object</a>
Review status	Peer Reviewed (Editorial Group)
License	<a href="#">Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)</a>
Downloads	PDF format
Article DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-06/crozier">https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-06/crozier</a>
Cite as	Heslop, Sandy. “An Ivory Staff Terminal from Alcester.” In <i>British Art Studies: Invention and Imagination in British Art and Architecture, 600–1500</i> (Edited by Jessica Berenbeim and Sandy Heslop). London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2017. <a href="https://britishartstudies-06.netlify.app/alcester-crozier/">https://britishartstudies-06.netlify.app/alcester-crozier/</a> .