SOME RECENTLY DISCOVERED ANGLO-SAXON CARVINGS AT BREEDON-ON-THE-HILL

by

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During 1959, it became necessary to carry out certain restoration work upon the church of SS. Mary and Hardulph, Breedon-on-the-Hill, a building well-known for its magnificent series of Anglo-Saxon sculptured stones. After the removal of a rubble buttress, a carved stone was found, built horizontally into the exterior face of the wall of the north aisle. This stone was carefully extracted by the contractor's workmen, and seen to be a portion of a rectangular cross-shaft, with an overall length of 1 ft. 8½ in. and with sides 9½ in. by 8½ in. tapering to 7¾ in. by 6½ in. It had originally been decorated on all four surfaces, but one side had subsequently been defaced. The other three faces of the shaft were in a fair state of preservation.

The four sides were carved as follows:

I (Plate 1a) In panels. Above, unidentified biblical scene. Below, the Temptation of Adam and Eve.

II (Plate 1b) A winged devil.

III (Plate 1c) In panels. Above, a horseman. Below, a grotesque beast.

IV (Plate 1d) A figure with a halo (almost obliterated).

Side I presents the greatest problems of description and interpretation, for whilst the subject content of the lower panel is obvious, the upper panel depicts a scene, whose iconography is beset with difficulties. Furthermore, it was this side of the cross which had been exposed in the wall, and suffered weathering which has blurred the detail, particularly on the right-hand figure. (Plate 1a)

The two figures are clad in long robes, the left-hand figure being also hooded. This figure is depicted with head turned full face towards the viewer, whilst the right-hand figure is presented in profile. Between them the figures clasp a curved object, which is clearly the focal point of the scene. Also between the figures is a strangely-shaped object, suggestive of a table or altar. The right-hand figure appears to be holding this with his left hand, or perhaps resting his hand upon it. Behind the left-hand figure is a solid object.

The inspiration for this scene should surely be sought in biblical sources, especially in view of the juxtaposition to the well-known Old Testament subject below it on the cross-shaft. However, an examination of contemporary
PLATE I

(a)

(b)

Anglo-Saxon Carvings at Breedon-on-the-Hill

(c)
literary and sculptural illustrations has so far failed to produce an interpretation which is entirely acceptable.

It has been suggested that the curved object in the centre of the scene could represent Adam's rib, and indeed the shape is extremely rib-like. However, there are obvious objections to the idea that the scene is intended to show the extraction of Adam's rib, not least that Adam is depicted clothed. Nevertheless, it is just possible that this particular episode could have been executed by a sculptor with only a confused idea of the details of the story. The Creation of woman, after all, was not a subject which found very much favour with Anglo-Saxon sculptors.

Another episode, for which the style and detail of the panel are perhaps more appropriate is the Sacrifice of Isaac, a scene which appears fairly commonly in Anglo-Saxon art, and which is described in detail in old English literature. Possibly the figures on the Breedon panel do represent Abraham and Isaac, Abraham, with his hand raised holding the knife which Isaac touches, whilst in the background stands the prepared altar, and on the ground lies the bundle of wood. There are, however, many points of divergence between the treatment of the Breedon panel and the depiction of the Sacrifice theme elsewhere. Particularly, there is no suggestion of the Ram in the Thicket, which is almost invariably given a prominent place.

In view of these difficulties a final opinion upon the interpretation of this panel must be postponed.

From an artistic point of view the sculptural treatment of the figures is stiff and clumsy, the limbs apparently providing problems which the sculptor found difficult to overcome. There is a close resemblance between the figures and those shown on a cross-shaft from St. Peter's, York, now in the Yorkshire Museum. The similarity of treatment is best seen in the left-hand figure, which, like its York counterpart, is hooded and robed, with a comparable treatment of the legs and feet.

The lower panel presents fewer problems, for there are other parallels for the Temptation scene in pre-Conquest art.

The figures of the Breedon cross have been damaged by weathering, and the breaking of the shaft has removed Adam's legs. The figures are shown in profile, Eve with her left hand modestly placed, whilst she reaches with her right hand to pluck the apple. Between the figures, the serpent entwines itself around the trunk of the tree, the head apparently downwards.

The general appearance of this panel is reminiscent of the Temptation scene on the early ninth-century cross at Newent, Glos., though the figures there are presented frontally and not in profile. Artistically and technically the Newent carving is a superior piece of work, and although both crosses clearly fall within the general orbit of the pre-Danish Mercian style, the less sophisticated and rather naive treatment of the Breedon figures suggests a date nearer to the beginning of the tenth century.

Side II is a startling and vigorous composition with its fire-breathing devil rising on outspread wings from a pattern of interlace. The dramatic treatment of this face of the cross, together with that of the Anglian beast on
Side III, shows a barbaric freedom of expression which contrasts sharply with the clumsy stylisation of the human figures of the biblical scenes on Side I.

The stylistic treatment of the winged devil it typical of that which was particularly fashionable in Mercia during the years immediately prior to the Danish incursions of the 860s and 870s. (Plate Ib) The ribbon style with tangled beasts is found frequently in the ninth and tenth centuries, and is perhaps best represented on the series of cross-shafts from Derbyshire, especially on that from St. Alkmund’s, Derby, where the interlace pattern is markedly similar to that at Breedon. The Breedon devil is perhaps nearest in style to the figure contained on a tenth-century cross-shaft from Leeds, where it appears amidst a complicated pattern of interlace.4

The other panelled side, III, illustrates two subjects often presented upon cross-shafts. The horseman, especially, is a common subject, widely distributed throughout England, though found more frequently in Northumbria than Mercia. (Plate Ic)

The lower panel provides further evidence for assigning this cross to the late Mercian school. Here, once again, is the traditional trade-mark of the Anglian sculptor, the rearing, spindle-legged beast, in this case, a descendant of the grotesque monsters which fight their way through the frets and scrolls of the Breedon wall friezes, some hundred years earlier. Throughout the whole range of pre-Conquest carving from the Midlands, the beast appears again and again, in various guises on cross-shafts and panels to satisfy the Mercian taste for fantastic animals.

It is unfortunate that Side IV has been so sadly mutilated, for the scanty detail which remains suggests that here was another example of an angel or saint in a similar style to the figures at Castor and Fletton. (Plate Iia)

Another re-used stone extracted from the fabric of the church provides a further addition to the Breedon school of figure sculpture. On a panel is a haloed portrait of Christ or an Evangelist, with a book held in the left hand, and the right hand held in blessing (Plate IIb). Like other figure representations of the ninth century from Mercia, it is carved in low relief in a flattened, silhouetted style. The figure is firmly defined, the formal, emphatic treatment of the costume being characteristic of the hard purposefulness of the stylistically later examples of Mercian figure sculpture. In the Breedon series, the newly-discovered figure is perhaps closest in style to the half-length figure beneath a round arch, now built into the east wall of the south aisle. The whole attitude of the figure is again comparable with the figures in the friezes at Fletton.5

A fragment from a Saxon cross-shaft of sandstone had been re-used as a lintel to a small doorway in the south aisle, and the one visible face with a scroll of trefoil leaves and interlace pattern was published by Clapham.6 This stone has now been extracted and it has been possible to make a fuller examination. It is 4 ft. 7½ in. long, 12 in. wide, and 8 in. deep. Two of the faces have been completely obliterated, but the third side is now seen to be decorated with panels and circles of interlace. (Plate IIIa)
During the further course of the work of restoration, plaster was stripped from the interior wall of the north aisle, and high up at the eastern end was found a further section of the well-known Breedon friezes. The newly-discovered fragment consists of the end of one frieze, and shows three long-legged birds with heads bent back over their bodies, pecking at bunches of grapes. (Plate IIIb) The birds strut and stand amongst their foliage background, with legs crossed over the tendrils in the usual Anglo-Saxon “lock”.

The discovery of this frieze is especially pleasing, for having been inside the building and plastered over, it has not suffered the damage which weathering inflicted upon many of the Breedon carvings during the centuries when they were built into the outside fabric of the church. The new frieze is distinguished by the fine detail and texture of the carving, and is a reminder of the high degree of artistic achievement current in the Midland Kingdom at the end of the eighth and beginning of the ninth centuries. Here, if need be, is further vindication of Clapham’s dating, for the freshness and spirit of these birds have no counterpart in the comparatively uninspired art motifs of Danish and post-Danish Mercia.

The following note was contributed by Mr. D. T-D. Clarke:

In addition to the above, a further fragment was discovered having a human leg, a short tunic and two water pots, perhaps representing the miracle at Cana. This seems to be too developed to be Anglo-Saxon, and might be as late as the sixteenth century.

NOTES

4. G. Baldwin Brown, *ibid.*, Pl. LXXX.
5. A. W. Clapham, *op. cit.*, Pl. XL.
7. A. W. Clapham, *ibid.*, Pls. XXXI-XXXIV.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to the Revd. J. Cowperthwaite, M.A., Vicar of Breedon; to Dr. G. Zarnecki, M.A., of the Courtauld Institute of Art; Miss Rosemary Cramp, M.A., University of Durham; and Mr. D. T-D. Clarke, M.A., Curator of Colchester and Essex Museum, for advice and help. I am also indebted to Mr. Brian Waters, Leicester Museums, for supplying the photographs for Plates IIa, IIb and IIIa.