

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

A Romano-Celtic Sculpture at Churcham

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1923, Vol. 45, 91-93

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A ROMANO-CELTIC SCULPTURE AT CHURCHAM.

By ST. CLAIR BADDELEY.

(ONE PLATE).

INCORPORATED with the wall of this ancient Church (3 $\frac{3}{4}$ m. W. of Gloucester) above the arched hood-mould of its North (Norman) door, has been inserted a small oblong stone plaque measuring 16 inches by 13 inches. It is sculptured with a schematic symmetrical design in relief, and obviously it belongs to some cult practised in pre-Christian days, probably within this ultra-Severn region. It is made, however, not of Forest-stone, but of oolite from Cotswold. Although the subject represented is definitely a religious one, it is by no means easy of interpretation; partly, because some portions of it have suffered violent injury in days long before it was thoughtfully placed in the church-wall; still further injury from shaving its sides, and yet again from burial in damp ground; for it is still very green. Chiefly, however, it is hard to read because we know as yet so little about Celtic local Cults (out of Gaul), and their various symbolical features. The base-line of it forms a flat (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ inch) unincised plinth. Needless to say, the figure has been often regarded as that of some Christian Saint.¹

What, however, appears to be outside disputation is that the single figure is that of some male Divinity, clothed nearly to the feet in a long tunic which may possibly have had both collar and sleeves. Though the

¹ This church was extensively restored in 1878 after a fire. The ultra-green colour of the Plaque suggests immersion in the old pond hard by. I have been given to understand it has often been regarded as an obscure saint; and this idea has perhaps caused its preservation.



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faceless head is exaggerated in size in proportion to the body, the nature of the God's headgear cannot be definitely recognised any more than can be his features. But though the face has been broken off, the tops of the ears remain visible, and on the upper left side of the head I have been able however, to trace strokes intended to represent hair. As other strokes made like these occur just below the former (right) ear, we may conjecture that the figure was certainly bearded.

The hands and elbows are symmetrically half-extended apart from the two sides of the body, while in each hand is firmly grasped a trilobate object, doubtless, one of very sacred significance, which the figure appears to be formally waving with deliberate intention. At each of the lower angles of this oblong plaque is placed a shield-like wheel having a central (?) lozenge-shaped hollow (in place of the usual nave), formed by four spokes, curiously fashioned like oval loops of cord. This treatment suggests Celtic rather than Roman design. The semi-circular, but damaged form of the niche that holds the figure is shown by remains of the chipped and worn-down spandrels of an arch.

As to the intention of the two rolling wheels (right and left) with their quadrifoliate (interlacing) spoke-design, we shall probably not go far astray if we suggest reference to the Sun, perhaps, the rising and descending Sun? Their four spokes, however, do not resemble fire-bringing *Swastika*, though such may be implied. At any rate, the notion of the Sun being both a wheel and a shield is very ancient, and it was probably from a non-classic source that the Teutonic *Wuotan* derived his one eye that was both shield and wheel.

But the interest of this small composition culminates rather in speculation as to the nature of those other, or ritual, trilobate symbols that are held up and waved in the hands. We may be just possibly near the truth if we

hazard that by these are intended three-pronged thunderbolts. A like symbol was displayed by the God Adad in creations of Syrian art. But whatever these may be, they are being waved for some ritual purpose; in other words, we have here depicted probably a powerful Divinity manifesting some characteristic action. Was he a Dobunic Jove or Apollo?

With respect to the supra-normal size of the head, until we had made more minute inspection we had almost ventured to suggest that it might have been intended here to represent a tricephalic Divinity, of the kind not infrequently met with in Gaul, such as was Esus the principal deity, or Esus-Mercurius (*tricephalus*). But we are satisfied such was not the case. A place for inscription, although the latter is wanting (as well as the general style), points to a date in Romano-British days probably 3rd century. In any case, this remarkable little Gloucestershire survival from Celto-Roman days deserves more consideration than it has been hitherto accorded.¹

¹ At Carhaix in Brittany children used to run about the streets at Xmas crying—Adieu Noël! Noël! s'en va! In many places discs of wood are ignited in the midsummer fires and hurled into the air. In Bulgaria these are small wheels with hay twisted around the rim and spokes.