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The Gloucester Christ

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THE GLOUCESTER CHRIST

by PROFESSOR D. TALBOT RICE, F.S.A.

THE stone slab illustrated on PLATE XV, which was formerly built into a wall of the Bishop's Palace at Gloucester, has already been published several times. Keyser was the first to describe it¹; he regarded it as a portion of a Norman tympanum of the 12th century, and stated that it was difficult to make out the pose of the figure, though the arms seemed to be holding something in front of the chest. On the left he noted a bird, which he took to be the Holy Dove, describing it as unusual, but citing other instances where doves appear in association with a figural subject. Subsequently it was again published by Dr Dobson,² who gave a rather more informative description, regarding it as representing the head and shoulders of Christ. She notes that the border was composed of a caulicula or voluted crocket, a well-known Carolingian motif. Thus, without committing herself as to date, she seems to favour a Saxon rather than a Norman origin. In addition the slab has quite frequently been mentioned more briefly.³ It has now been removed to Gloucester Chapter House, and it seems opportune to mark the occasion of its entry there by a new and rather fuller description.

The sculpture is in very poor condition, but the bust of a human figure, with a cruciform halo behind the head, the whole surrounded by a circular border, can be clearly discerned, and to the right of the head is what looks like a bird. At a first glance the figure would appear to have been hooded, so that it looks more like the Virgin than Christ; but the resemblance

¹ 'A Sculptured Norman Tympanum at Gloucester,' *Journ. of the British Archaeological Assn.*, N.S., Vol. xviii, 1912, p. 162, with pl. See also his *Norman Tympana and Lintels*, London, 1927, p. lxxvi and pl. 89A.

² 'Anglo-Saxon Buildings and Sculptures in Gloucestershire,' *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, 55, 1933, p. 27 and fig. 12.

³ For example by the writer of this article in his *English Art*, 871-1100, Oxford, 1952, p. 95.



PLATE XV

to a head dress is probably fortuitous, and results from the way in which the face has subsequently been cut away. In any case, the cruciform nimbus identifies the figure as without doubt that of Christ, unless some very curious and unusual misunderstanding of the rules of iconography has taken place, and this is most unlikely.

The disposition is that reserved for the Christ Almighty or Pantocrator. His left arm normally clasps a book, and His right hand is raised in blessing. This disposition was usual both in East and West. We know it in the Byzantine world through numerous mosaics and ivories,¹ and in the West mainly through ivories and miniatures.² The type was disseminated not only by means of ivories, which were frequently transported, but also by coins, for such figures were often included on one side of the Imperial Byzantine issues. The main differences between the Eastern and Western works lies in the style, and in the fact that in the East, after the 9th century, Christ was invariably bearded, whereas in the West he was usually beardless. It is unfortunately impossible to say in this case to which iconographical type our figure is to be assigned. What does seem certain is that the Gloucester slab follows a continental prototype fairly closely.

The bird-like object immediately to the right of Christ's head is more unusual, and is not easy to explain. In a miniature dated 983 in the town library at Trier, St. Gregory is shown with a dove perched on his shoulder in much the same position as here,³ but a cruciform nimbus could not be associated with S. Gregory. It is possible that the sculptor had seen a miniature like the Trier one and had got the themes confused, but it seems more likely that the bird-like figure is not a bird at all,

¹ For example, an ivory in the Victoria and Albert, no. A4, 1910, *Cat. of Ivory Carvings*, vol. 1, 1927, pl. xvii, or one in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, O. M. Dalton, *Fitzwilliam Museum, Mc'Clean Bequest*, 1912, no. 37. There are similar ivories in the Louvre and elsewhere.

² For example, the Gospels of Charlemagne from St. Sernin at Toulouse, in the Bibliothèque Nationale; A. Goldschmidt, *Die Deutsche Buchmalerei*, Munich-Florence, 1928, vol. 1, pl. 25.

³ Goldschmidt, *op. cit.*, vol. xi, pl. 7.

but some object that has been given a bird-like appearance in order to give meaning to a form that was not understood. Henry Balfour has shown what strange results can be produced in primitive art by copying forms, the meanings of which are not known,¹ and that is probably what has happened here. In portrayals of the Pantocrator the figure of Christ is quite often supported by angels² which bear veils in their hands, and it may be that the 'bird' is really a hand covered with a veil, which has strayed from its context.

The circular border again suggests parallels with the continent, where such things were normal. But the pattern is very debased. It must be derived from a guilloche or Vitruvian scroll of classical character, so stylised that it has become little more than a series of hooks or loops. An intermediate stage in the evolution is to be found in continental sculptures of early Carolingian times; a brick sculpture from the church of Sainte Croix and Saint Vincent at Paris may serve as an example.³

Continental parallels are thus comparatively numerous, and the closest of them belong to Carolingian art rather than to Ottonian. For that reason it is tempting to suggest a date quite early in the later Saxon period for the Gloucester slab. Further, the style, so far as it can be discerned, seems to support such a dating; certainly everything about the slab bears out its Saxon character, and there is little about it that can be considered as Norman. To the writer, at any rate, the 12th century date proposed by Keyser seems highly improbable. The slab should rather be dated to the 10th century, an age when links with continental art were to the fore; it is even possible that it dates from quite early in the century. It must be later than the lovely Codford St. Peter shaft, but is also probably earlier than the Deerhurst Angel, which is usually assigned to the first quarter of the 10th century.⁴

¹ *The Evolution of Decorative Art*, London, 1893, p. 27 and pl. 1.

² See for instance a Carolingian ivory in the Trivulzio collection at Milan of c. 975, Haseloff, *Pre-Romanesque Sculpture in Italy*, 1930, pl. 76.

³ J. Hubert, *L'Art pre-Roman*, Paris, 1938, pl. xxvii.

⁴ D. Talbot Rice, *English Art, 971-1100*, Oxford, 1952, p. 92 and pl. 8b.