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The Newent Funerary Tablet

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THE NEWENT FUNERARY TABLET

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TWO Anglo-Saxon sculptures of considerable interest are preserved in Newent Church in north-west Gloucestershire. One is a fragment of a 9th-century cross-shaft¹ of the Mercian type,² the other a funerary tablet which is the subject of this paper.

The tablet was found in 1912 but so far comparatively little attention has been paid to it.³ It is a small slab of light sandstone ($8 \times 6\frac{1}{2}$ inches and $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches thick). The sculpture is applied not only to both faces of the tablet but also to its four edges, a detail indicating that it was a detached object. Indeed, we learn from the account of its discovery⁴ that it was found five feet below the surface of the graveyard of Newent Church 'in conjunction with the remains of two bodies, the skull of one resting on the tablet'.⁵

The sculpture of the Newent tablet is overcrowded with figural representations which are iconographically unconventional and executed in a naïve style which makes the explanation of the subjects very difficult. One face is carved with the Crucifixion scene (PLATE III). The cross with expanding, 'Maltese' arms of irregular shape is marked by an outline in relief. The lack of symmetry in the design of the cross as well as the summarily treated figures, which show that no attempt was made to model human features, may indicate that the work was hastily executed for the burial.

¹ *Proc. Soc. Antiq.*, Second Series, vol. 21, 1906-7, p. 478.

² T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900*, London, 1938, p. 182.

³ By far the best description of it was written by Dr. D. P. Dobson in her paper on 'Anglo-Saxon Buildings and Sculpture in Gloucestershire', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, vol. 55, 1933, pp. 272-3. Thanks are due to the Parish Church Council of Newent and to the Gloucester City Museum for permission to reproduce Plates III and IV.

⁴ E. Conder in *Proc. Soc. Antiq.*, Second Series, vol. 24, 1912, pp. 323-6, figs. 1-2.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 324.

The body of Christ is long, the head leans to one side and is encircled by a nimbus or perhaps by long hair. The legs of Christ rest on a projection. Above the head of Christ and within the outlines of the cross the hand of God emerges from the clouds, which are marked by wavy lines across the top edge of the tablet. On either side of the hand and confronting it is a bird which is probably the symbol of the Holy Ghost, duplicated for the sake of decorative effect. On each side of Christ's feet, also within the outline of the cross, stand two small figures in attitudes of agitation. They have no attributes but one can assume that they represent Longinus and Stephaton. To their left and right are two further figures, larger in size, represented with obvious gestures of grief, which are, no doubt, the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist.

In medieval representations of the Crucifixion, the figures of Longinus and Stephaton and those of the Virgin and St. John are placed in pairs, one pair above the other, as for instance, on the 11th century panel at Romsey Abbey¹; but, equally frequently, they are placed in one horizontal row, as at Newent or, for instance, on one of the illuminations of the Psalter of St. Bertin in the Municipal Library at Boulogne-sur-Mer (MS 20, f. 109, PLATE VI).²

In the left-hand bottom corner of the tablet is a figure placed upside-down in a sarcophagus. This is probably Adam, who as the father of mankind, is often seen in a grave below the Crucifixion scenes. In an interesting miniature of c. 975 from Fulda, now in the Universitätsbibliothek at Göttingen (*Cod. Theol.*, f. 231)³ we find both Adam and Eve placed in their sarcophagi directly under the cross.

There are still a number of other figures completing the composition of this face of the Newent tablet. They vary in size, positions and gestures, filling all the available surfaces

¹ T. D. Kendrick, *Late Saxon and Viking Art*, London, 1949, p. 40 pl. XL, 3.

² V. Leroquais, *Les Psautiers Manuscrits Latins des Bibliothèques Publiques de France*, vol. 1, Macon, 1940-1, 76, pl. 21.

³ A. Goldschmidt, *German Illumination*, vol. 2, Ottonian Period, Florence, 1928, 106.

within and outside the cross. Whom do they represent? In what relation do they stand to the Crucifixion scene? Unfortunately it is impossible to give an entirely satisfactory answer to these questions. It seems to me, however, that one of the figures can be identified and that it gives a clue to the meaning of the entire composition. But first let us return for a moment to the Crucifixion of the Psalter of St. Bertin, mentioned above. To the left of the Crucifixion scene (PLATE VI), in the upright of the letter 'D' is the 'Harrowing of Hell'. I believe that on the Newent tablet we have a naïve representation of the same scene. Just below the right hand of the crucified Christ is a small figure shown horizontally holding a cross turned downwards. There can be little doubt that this is Christ descending to hell as described in the Apocryphal Gospels.¹ If this identification is correct, then the remaining little figures can perhaps be interpreted as completing the scene of the 'Harrowing of Hell' and the strange form in the left-hand upper corner of the tablet might have been intended to represent the Mouth of Hell.

One could mention many scenes of the Crucifixion with the 'Harrowing of Hell' as a subsidiary subject in the period that concerns us here.² But the most interesting for our purposes is the example quoted above, the Psalter of St. Bertin. This MS. decorated by Otbert, abbot of St. Bertin at St. Omer in 999 is not only closely related in its style to the so-called Winchester school of illumination but also this MS. or its prototype was known to English illuminators, notably to the artist who decorated the Psalter of Bury St. Edmunds, preserved in the Vatican Library (*Regin. lat. 12*)³ and dating from the second quarter of the 11th century.

Very little can be said about the style of the Newent carving. The 'horror vacui', that barbaric anxiety not to leave any empty surface unfilled, is found here in a striking form. The

¹ M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1924, p. 117 ff.

² For instance two German ivories of the 10th or 11th centuries illustrated by A. Goldschmidt in *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Zeit der Karolingischen und Sächsischen Kaiser*, vol. 2, Berlin, 1918, 85 and 86.

³ F. Wormald, *English Drawings of the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries*, London, 1952, p. 47.

figures are crude and lifeless and in spite of an obvious attempt at symmetry, the composition is confused. The figure of Christ on the cross has, however, certain analogies in pre-Conquest sculpture. It can, for instance, be compared to the 11th century ivory cross found in 1857 near the Priory at Lewes in Sussex, and now in the British Museum¹ (PLATE VIIIb). The elongated body of Christ, the feet supported by a projection and the shape of the cross with its extending arms are fairly close in both cases. But much more relevant for the Newent tablet is its similarity to a tomb-slab preserved in the church at Llanveyneoe (PLATE VIIIa) in the neighbouring county of Herefordshire.² Here the lifeless figure of Christ with His head leaning towards the right shoulder and the cross marked by an outline in low relief are very similar to the Newent Crucifixion. The Llanveyneoeslab is ascribed to the 11th century and I suggest similar date for the Newent tablet.

So far I have not mentioned a detail of the Crucifixion scene on the Newent tablet which throws some light on its immediate prototype. At the head and the foot of the cross are pairs of little circles in relief which undoubtedly imitate the pierced holes of a metal or ivory crucifix, such as were made to fasten it to another material, a wooden bookbinding, for instance. The pectoral cross from Lewes, mentioned above, has, for instance, such holes, two each at the head, the foot, and the arms. That such holes, or the nails in them, became employed eventually for decorative purposes is well illustrated by a South Italian ivory crucifix, dating from the 11th century, in the collection of M. Adolphe Stocklet in Brussels.³ It is decorated with no less than twenty-five little rosettes, imitating enriched nail-heads. It was probably in view of these ornamental nail-holes that Professor D. Talbot Rice described the Newent tablet as closely based on a metal-work prototype.⁴

¹ O. M. Dalton, *Catalogue of the Ivory Carvings of the Christian Era*, British Museum, London, 1909, No. 35.

² Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England: *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Herefordshire*, vol. 1, South-West, 1931, p. 173.

³ A. Goldschmidt, *Die Elfenbeinskulpturen aus der Romanischen Zeit*, vol. 4, Berlin, 1926, 154, pl. 56.

⁴ D. Talbot Rice, *English Art, 871-1100*, Oxford, 1952, p. 143.



PLATE III. The Newent Funerary Tablet



PLATE IV. The Newent Funerary Tablet



PLATE V. The Newent Funicary Tablet

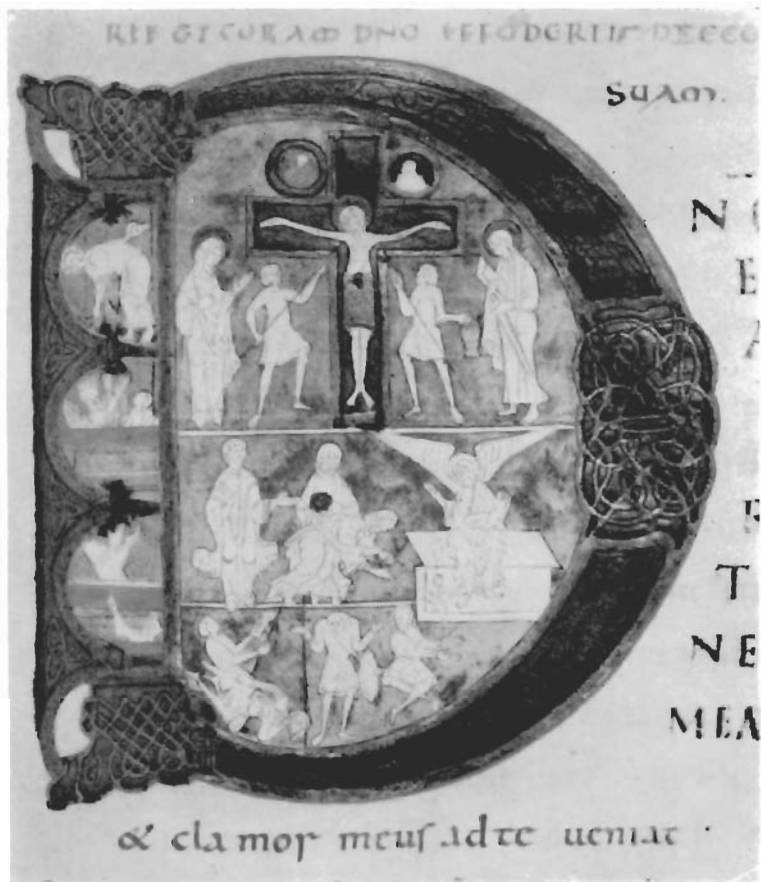


PLATE VI

The Psalter of St. Bertin in the Municipal Library at Boulogne-sur-Mer
(MS. 20, f. 109)

a**b**

PLATE VII (a) Grave-Slab from Llanvynoe, Herefordshire.
 (b) Ivory Cross from Lewes, British Museum.
 (c) Grave-Slab from Wensley, Yorks.

It is impossible to go beyond this statement, except by including an ivory as a possible prototype.¹

Let us now turn to the other carvings on the Newent tablet. Round the edges in raised letters, are inscribed the names of the Evangelists, separated by little crosses and the name Edred (PLATE v). The name Edred appears also in the left-hand upper corner of the remaining side of the tablet. Professor F. Wormald, whom I consulted about these inscriptions, kindly informs me that they are characteristic of the 11th century.²

The subject of the remaining side of the Newent tablet (PLATE IV) is extremely difficult to understand. The largest figure, and the figure that is the centre of the composition, is shown facing the spectator. He is dressed in ecclesiastic robes with a cross on the chest, and he holds a large cross in his left hand and a staff (the central portion of which is broken away) in the other. In the left-hand bottom corner is a standing figure holding a large sword above his head. Nine other figures of various sizes and in various positions complete the composition. Two are below the feet of the central figure, two others on his left are upside-down. In the left-hand upper corner, just below the name of Edred is a figure in a horizontal position, and I suggest that it represents Edred, the dead man, for whom the tablet was made. I further suggest that the scene here represented is the Last Judgment with Christ in the centre. I of course realise the difficulty in reconciling the ecclesiastical robes of the figure with those usually worn by Christ, but this is a provincial work, and as we have already seen, full of oddities. The figure holding the sword is the Archangel Michael, who divides the elect, those on the right of Christ, including Edred, from the damned, to the left of Christ, and below Him, shown upside-down or prostrated under His feet. To which category the two figures in the right-hand upper corner belong, it is difficult to say.

¹ This view was first expressed by Dr Dobson, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

² I wish to express my thanks to Professor Wormald for his kind help in this matter.

If my interpretation of this scene is correct, the Newent tablet would thus emerge as a logical, though naïve, cycle of scenes connected with death, the supreme sacrifice of Christ leading through the triumph over death to eternal salvation. What could be more appropriate as a funerary stone?

If we are to believe in the correctness of the account of its discovery, the Newent tablet is one of those now almost legendary 'pillow-stones'. All serious modern writers, however, no longer seem to believe in their existence. Monuments of this type first came to light at Hartlepool (Durham) in 1833. They consist of small slabs, marked with a cross, inscribed with the name of the deceased, and ORATE PRO before it. The inscriptions are in runes or in Hiberno-Saxon letters. The slabs were found in conjunction with numerous skeletons, but the various accounts of the discovery differ in describing how the stones were placed in relation to the skulls. Professor G. Baldwin Brown went into the evidence very thoroughly, and in spite of the existence of five accounts giving the position of the skulls as resting *on* the slabs, believed himself that the skulls rested not *on*, but were placed *against* the slabs.¹ Sir Charles Peers even went so far as to suggest that the slabs were originally laid flat on the ground above the graves.²

The Hartlepool slabs are not the only ones of that type. Some more were found, though not in their original positions, at Lindisfarne (Northumberland), Billingham (Durham), Birtley (Northumberland), and Wensley (Yorkshire). They date from the 7th and 8th centuries, with the exception of the two slabs from Wensley which are of a later, probably 9th century date. Professor Baldwin Brown connected the designs of these Northumberland slabs with Teutonic sources,³ a theory which has been rightly rejected by Sir Charles Peers,⁴ and Sir Thomas Kendrick.⁵ These slabs are undoubtedly Celtic and they show unquestionably a close relationship with

¹ G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, vol. 5, London, 1921, p. 73.

² C. R. Peers, 'The Inscribed and Sculptured Stones of Lindisfarne', *Archaeologia*, vol. 75, 1925, p. 258.

³ Baldwin Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

⁴ Peers, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

⁵ Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, p. 110.

a group of grave-memorials in Ireland, centred mainly at Clonmacnoise. The surviving Irish examples are of the 9th and 10th centuries, but they derive from an archetype of the 7th century.¹ Both the Irish and the Northumbrian slabs have crosses on one face only, and a rough back which was to lie flat on the ground.

The earliest Northumbrian grave-slabs bear no resemblance to the Newent tablet, and there can hardly be a question of any connection between them. But one of the Wensley slabs (PLATE VIIC) with the name of DONFRID in Hiberno-Saxon letters supplies an interesting comparison with it. The slab is decorated with a 'Maltese' cross as at Newent, and an extremely rare occurrence, its inscription is in raised letters, again as at Newent. The space between the arms of the cross is filled with decorative birds and dragons, and one cannot help seeing some relation between the two birds, one on either side of the head of the cross, and the two doves of the Holy Ghost in the Crucifixion scene at Newent. There is little more than a hundred years between the dates of these two monuments, and one feels that they may be links in the same chain of development, but many connecting links are missing. Perhaps it is not without significance that the other Anglo-Saxon sculpture at Newent, the fragment of the mid-9th century cross-shaft, although of the Mercian type, shows, according to Sir Thomas Kendrick, analogies with Northumbrian forms.²

It is impossible to say whether the Newent tablet was actually used as a 'pillow-stone', or whether it was placed in some other position in the grave. The discovery of the skull resting on it was not followed by a scientific examination. Perhaps the skull belonged to an altogether different period as it could well have done, in a churchyard which has been in use for centuries. There is not sufficient evidence in support of the 'pillow-stone' theory, but there can be no doubt that the Newent tablet was a funerary object, as is testified by the subjects carved upon it.

¹ F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period*, London, 1940, p. 75.

² Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, p. 182.