

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

A Newly Discovered Relief at Ruardean

by G. Zarnecki
1957, Vol. 76, 70-74

© The Society and the Author(s)

A NEWLY DISCOVERED RELIEF AT RUARDEAN

By GEORGE ZARNECKI

A SMALL carved stone (PLATE III) has recently been found at Ruardean in the Forest of Dean, close to the Herefordshire border. It was discovered in a house when removing an old oven, and it is now in the possession of Mr J. Harper.¹

The carving is of considerable interest and I shall try to show that there are good reasons for believing that originally it formed part of the decoration of Ruardean church, and that it is closely linked with the well-known Herefordshire school of sculpture of the 12th century.

The masons and sculptors of the Herefordshire school were active between 1140 and 1160 chiefly in Herefordshire, but some of their works are found in neighbouring counties.² They built and decorated Shobdon, Kilpeck, Rowlestone (all three in Herefordshire) and Rock (in Worcestershire); they were entrusted with the decoration of the west front of Leominster Priory and supplied fonts to numerous churches in Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire. Many of the churches built or decorated by them have been entirely rebuilt and yet some of the sculptures were saved by being incorporated into new buildings, a testimony of their continuing popularity.

¹ I am greatly indebted to Dr Joan Evans for having drawn my attention to this discovery and for sending me the photograph of the carving published in the *Gloucestershire Countryside*, January-March, 1957, vol. 9, No. 6, and to Mr Payne, the Editor, for his help. Mr F. W. Baty of May Hill, Longhope, has very kindly provided me with a photograph.

² The Herefordshire school has been discussed by E. S. Prior and A. Gardner, *An Account of Medieval Figure-Sculpture in England*, Cambridge, 1912, pp. 167 ff.; S. Jónsdóttir, 'The Portal of Kilpeck Church: Its Place in English Romanesque Sculpture', *Art Bulletin*, vol. xxxii, 1950, pp. 71 ff.; T. S. R. Boase, *English Art, 1100-1216*, Oxford, 1953, pp. 78 ff.; G. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture, 1140-1210*, London, 1953, pp. 9 ff.; F. C. Morgan, *The Herefordshire School of Sculpture and Kilpeck Church*, Hereford, 1954; L. Stone, *Sculpture in Britain, The Middle Ages*, 1955, pp. 66 ff.



PLATE III. Ruardean. Newly discovered relief with Pisces

facing p. 70



PLATE IV. Brinsop. Tympanum with St. George
Pisces is carved on the third voussoir from right



PLATE V. Ruardean. Tympanum with St. George



PLATE VI. St. John's College, Cambridge, MS. 20,
f. 2 v. Pisces



PLATE VII. Kilpeck. Detail of south doorway.
Pisces

The chief work of the school seems to have been the church at Shobdon which was, unfortunately, demolished in the 18th century. The two doorways and the chancel arch are the sole survivors of the structure, re-erected in the nearby park in the form of a romantic ruin.

The foundation of Shobdon has been described in some detail in a 13th-century document.¹ From it we learn that a local knight, Oliver de Merlimond, resolved to build a church on his lands at Shobdon and, while the work was in progress, he made a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James the Apostle at Compostela in Spain. We know that on his return journey he stayed in Paris and we can surmise that he travelled along the usual route of the pilgrims described in the famous *Pilgrim's Guide* in the Codex Calixtinus.² Thus, returning from Spain, he probably visited Bordeaux, Saintes, Poitiers and Tours, all recommended places of worship for the pilgrims.

As I have suggested elsewhere,³ he must have included in his retinue one of the sculptors employed at Shobdon, for the surviving arches at Shobdon Park are strongly influenced by the sculpture of Western France, chiefly of Poitou and Saintonge, which makes it almost certain that the Shobdon sculptor had a personal knowledge of the churches of those regions. During the reign of Henry II, under whose rule England was united with Aquitaine, artistic contacts between Western France and England were strong. But at the time Shobdon was built (it was dedicated before 1143, at least nine years before King Henry's accession to the throne) there is little evidence of Western French artistic influence elsewhere in England.

In other works of the Herefordshire school, Western French elements are found persistently, but nowhere are they as obvious as on two tympana preserved at Brinsop and Stretton

¹ Chicago University Library, MS. 224.

² *Le Guide du Pèlerin de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle*, ed. by Jeanne Vielliard, Mâcon, 1938. The oldest surviving copy of the Codex Calixtinus, preserved at Compostela, is decorated with illuminations which seem to be of Norman workmanship.

³ Zarnecki, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Sugwas, two neighbouring Herefordshire villages. The former represents St. George on horseback (PLATE IV) and the latter Samson and the lion. Both these subjects must have been transmitted to Herefordshire through sketches made by Oliver de Merlimond's sculptor, when passing through Parthenay-le-Vieux not far from Poitiers, for there, still preserved on the façade of the church, are two strikingly similar tympana, executed between 1120 and 1130, that is shortly before Merlimond's journey to Spain. The tympanum with a rider at Parthenay-le-Vieux does not represent St. George, but Constantine, a favourite subject in the 12th-century sculpture of the region.¹ The church at Brinsop was dedicated to St. George, so the Herefordshire sculptor slightly modified his French model to suit local purposes.

His work must have been admired by his contemporaries for it was copied by another, though less gifted, sculptor of the Herefordshire workshop at Ruardean (PLATE V) on a tympanum still preserved over the church doorway.² At Brinsop, the St. George tympanum was originally set within a richly carved arch or arches, composed of a number of voussoirs, many of which are still preserved, though not in their original position. Two of these represent the signs of the Zodiac, Sagittarius and Pisces (the latter is illustrated on PLATE IV).

In English Romanesque sculpture the signs of the Zodiac were seldom carved as a complete series. It was more usual to select a few of the signs and use them, together with other motives, for purely decorative purposes. In some cases the same sign is used more than once within one decorative scheme, showing that the sculptor was not interested in its true meaning but simply enjoyed the decorative qualities of the design. At Shobdon, for instance, Pisces is repeated twice on the same arch.

Pisces is generally represented as a pair of fishes with their heads pointing in opposite directions, their mouths joined by

¹ R. Crozet, *L'Art Roman en Poitou*, Paris, 1948, pp. 207 ff.

² The similarity of the Ruardean tympanum to that at Brinsop was first discussed in the *Archaeological Journal*, II, 1846, p. 390.

an S-shaped line (PLATE VI).¹ In this traditional form they appear only once in the Herefordshire school, namely on the doorway at Kilpeck (PLATE VII). On one of the corbels of that church, however, Pisces is carved in a quite unconventional way, for the heads point in one direction only and the fishes are not joined together. It is in this form that Pisces was used twice at Shobdon and to the same type belongs also the voussoir over the St. George tympanum at Brinsop (PLATE IV).

The newly found sculpture at Ruardean has Pisces carved in precisely this Herefordshire manner. This alone should be sufficient to attribute the carving to the Herefordshire school. Since the Ruardean tympanum is also a work of the Herefordshire school, closely resembling the tympanum at Brinsop, it is reasonable to suppose that the relief with Pisces was executed by the same sculptor who carved the St. George tympanum, and that the small relief originally formed part of the decoration of the church at Ruardean.

The stone on which Pisces is carved does not taper and thus it is unlikely that it was a voussoir. It is certainly not a corbel and nothing definite can be said of its place in the decoration of the church. It is quite small, measuring 17 by 11 inches. Among the surviving sculptures of the Herefordshire school there are two fragments of panels of equally uncertain origin. One is built into the wall in Brinsop church and shows doves enclosed by rings.² The other is an unpublished panel built into a modern house at Monmouth and is carved with two warriors very similar to those on the well-known font at Eardisley.³

There are many ways in which these panels could have been employed. However, knowing how much the Herefordshire school owed to the art of Western France, one particular solution seems likely. This can best be illustrated by the

¹ For the discussion of the constellation Pisces see C. R. Dodwell, *The Canterbury School of Illumination, 1066-1200*, Cambridge, 1954, p. 64.

² *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England. Herefordshire*, vol. 11, London, 1932, p. 28, pl. 18.

³ Zarnecki, *op. cit.*, pl. 25.

example of Civray (Vienne) near Poitiers. The west doorway of this church is flanked on either side by flat jambs, decorated by carved panels. That this method was known to the sculptors of the Herefordshire school cannot be doubted, because it is found in one of their churches that is almost intact, at Rock in Worcestershire. There, the connection with Civray seems fairly certain as is shown by the geometrical motives decorating the jambs of the north doorway, which are exactly like those on the north jamb of the west doorway at Civray. On the south jamb of this Poitevin church, decorated with some figure-motives, there is one panel that is particularly significant for the Ruardean carving, for it represents Pisces.

The modest carving at Ruardean thus becomes one more link in this extraordinary artistic relationship between the Herefordshire school and Aquitaine, due to the pilgrimage of Oliver de Merlimond.