

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

The Martyrdom Wall-Paintings at St Leonard's Church, Stowell

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1984, Vol. 102, 133-140

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The 12th-century wall-painting of the Doom in the nave of St. Leonard's Church, Stowell, some 3 miles west of Northleach, has already been so adequately covered as not to need further consideration, but the contemporary fragments of wall-painting in the south transept are still not the subject of an agreed interpretation, and are consequently the subject of the present paper.

There are two separate fragments in the south transept, which are illustrated in PLATES I and II as they now (1983) exist, and it is proposed to begin with a chronological summary of what has already been written about them, though not all the descriptions will tally with the present appearance of the wall-paintings.

The earliest mention of Stowell's wall-paintings usually given in the standard works of reference is an article which appeared in 1885, but in fact this is devoted to consecration crosses throughout the country as a whole, so that Stowell is given no more than two lines in a general catalogue which is irrelevant for present purposes.¹ The first article concerned with the wall-paintings in the usual sense is that of Mr C.E. Keyser, which appeared in 1897, being a transcript of an address given by him to the Society of Antiquaries on the then 'recently-discovered wall-paintings at Stowell Church'.² As to the paintings in the south transept Keyser said:—

'Those in the transept are somewhat confused, and it does not seem easy to interpret the design. They remain on the south wall on either side of the south window and partly along the west wall. On the east side of the window are at least two layers of paintings. The lower part belongs to the more ancient series, and shows a figure with a long-handled instrument, apparently stirring up some indistinct figures in a square tub. [Note: This therefore refers to PLATE I] A knight kneels below and there is an angel above. Both here and on the west side is a scroll border of the same character as that on the north wall of the nave. The groundwork is a deep red with a powdering of stars. On the west side of the window is a figure standing up with another behind it and holding up the hand to two figures, apparently a male and a female, who are kneeling before it. On the west wall can be made out a man with a large sword in his right hand and his left holding the head of a kneeling figure at his feet whom he is apparently about to decapitate. [PLATE II] There is the same deep red ground and scroll to these pictures . . . it almost seems as if these formed portions of [the Doom] on the north wall of the nave.'

Keyser dated the earlier wall-paintings, which would include those now visible in the transept, as the last quarter of the 12th century.⁴ It will be noted that he did not offer any specific identifications, but contented himself with a general description. He returned to the subject in 1901 when, perhaps following the train of thought which led him, in the extract quoted above, to connect the wall-paintings of the transept with the Doom in the nave, he suggested that the former 'seemed to show the punishments of the condemned, though not very distinct and there are remains of later paintings the subjects of which are also uncertain'.⁵

There the matter rested until 1927, when Mr Hobart Bird mentioned 'various figures [unspecified] of an early date' on the south wall of the transept, and also said that 'clearly visible is



PLATE I

East end of south wall

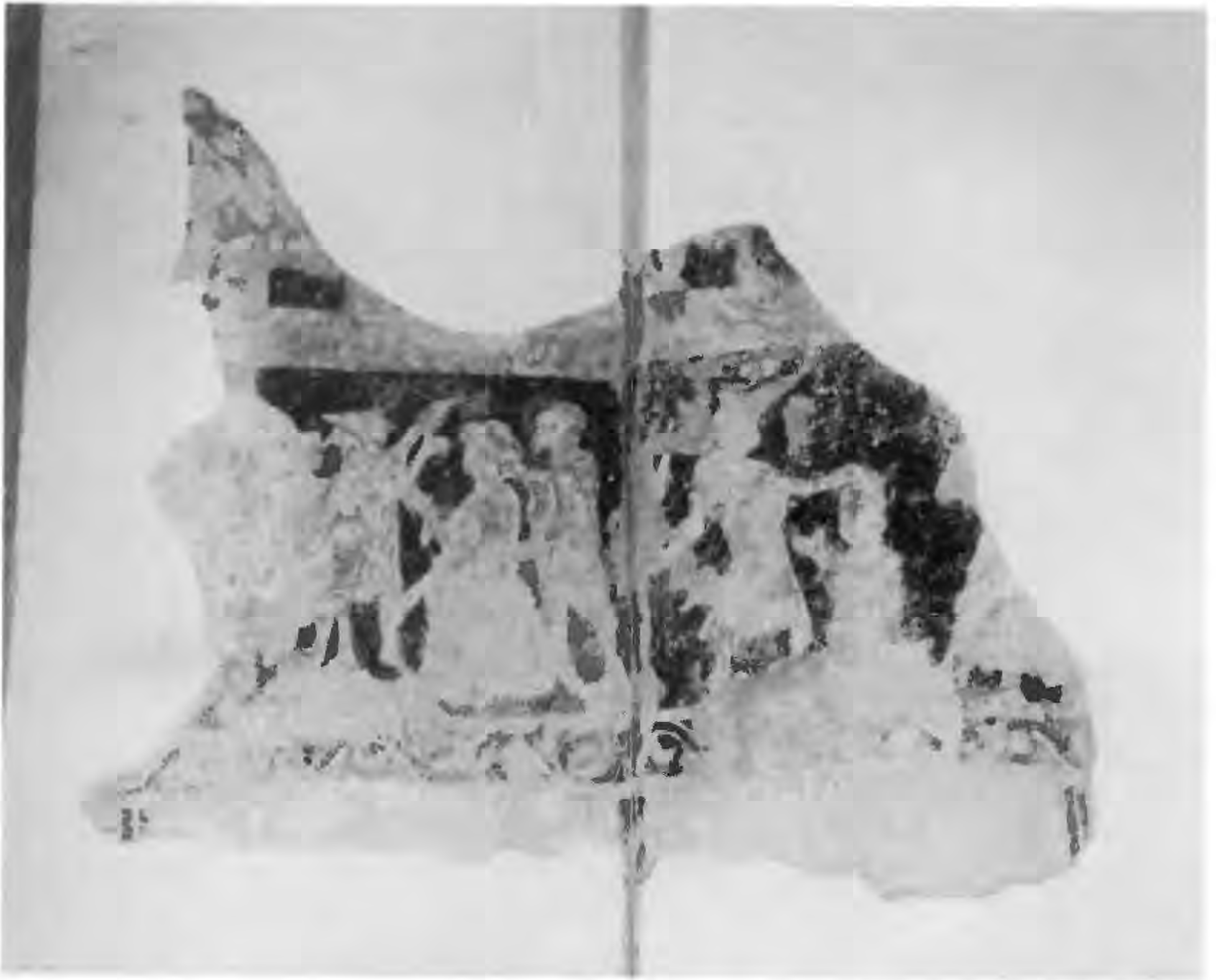


PLATE II

Composite photograph of the paintings in the south-west corner

part of a wheel'. He questioned whether it might be a Wheel of Life.⁶ However this may have been, the wheel is no longer to be seen.

In 1944, in his volume on 12th-century wall-paintings, Professor E.W. Tristram said:—

'The survivals in the south transept are in so perished a state that it is impossible to identify the series with any certainty. The scenes, so far as they can be deciphered, are all consistent with a representation of the history of St. Margaret'.⁷

Thus much for the main text of his book; in the Catalogue with which it concludes he elaborates this description as follows:—

'In the south transept the masonry pattern is visible, with traces of two tiers of subjects. On the south wall, at the east side of the window, there is a martyrdom scene. At the base of the subject a fragment of border remains, with scroll-work similar to that in the nave, above which is a figure, apparently female, represented lying in a cauldron over a fire, fanned by a man with bellows. [PL. I.] Another figure torments the body with a rake [Note: which Tristram shows as having a head the width of a modern rake, but with

only 5 prongs – see his Supplementary Plate 12a] and on the right stands a small figure turning away. Above, a sword emerges from Heaven, which is indicated symbolically with wavy lines. The tier above contains indecipherable remains of another subject, superimposed upon which there are fragments of a later figure of St. Catherine with the wheel, and some ornamental painting of a still later date.

The work on the west side of the window appears to be a continuation of the martyrdom on the east. The Saint undergoing the martyrdom, placed centrally, with a bearded man behind to the right, faces a tormentor wearing a clown's cap, and raising his arms as though in contumely [PLATE II]. Behind him stands a diminutive figure. In the next subject the Saint kneels, with upraised hands, the head grasped by the executioner, standing on the left, about to strike a blow with a sword. Part of another figure is visible on the right. The perished state of the painting makes it impossible to identify the Saint with certainty, but the scenes are consistent with the martyrdom of St. Margaret.⁸

These paintings are illustrated in both the Plates and the Supplementary Plates sections of this volume of Tristram; all are captioned 'History of St. Margaret (?)'. Plate 71 reproduces one of Tristram's water-colour copies, the subject being that of PLATE II of the present paper. Supplementary Plate 12a is a photograph of a drawing by Tristram of the wall-painting illustrated in PLATE I of the present paper, and Supplementary Plate 12b is of PLATE II. It is to be noted that Supplementary Plate 12a does not include the top tier, which comprised what Keyser thought was an angel, doubtless because by Tristram's day this had been reduced to what he called 'indecipherable remains', nor does it include the later remains of a 'St. Catherine with a wheel' which cannot in any event now be seen. It does however confirm that the kneeling man in the lower tier is using a bellows. The original of the drawing by Tristram reproduced in his Supplementary Plate 12a is now in the archives of the Victoria and Albert Museum, where its reference number is E. 3443–1931. The drawing itself is dated 1931. The Museum has told the present writer that Supplementary Plate 12a reproduces the whole of Tristram's drawing,⁹ so that he made no attempt to depict the 'indecipherable remains' nor the then St. Catherine.

Next comes Mr E.W. Antony, who in his *Romanesque Frescoes* (1951) describes the wall-paintings in the south transept as 'Fragments of scenes in a very ruinous condition, possibly a Life of St. Margaret'¹⁰ and reproduces the one in the south-west corner (PLATE II) in his Fig. 480, with the caption 'Life of St. Margaret?'.

In an article which appeared in 1956, Miss E. Carleton Williams identified a small figure of St. Catherine in the transept wall-paintings and part of a wheel dating from the 15th century superimposed upon them, citing as one of her authorities the remarks of Tristram quoted above.¹¹

Mr A. Caiger-Smith, in the Selective Catalogue appended to his book on English medieval wall-paintings which was published in 1963, describes those in the south transept as being the 'Remains of a story of a martyr, in tiers. 12th century.'¹²

The appropriate volume in Sir N. Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series, printed in 1970, after referring to the Doom in the nave as 'Romanesque work of c. 1150–1200', says 'Also, in the s transept, fragments of two more paintings of about the same date'.

In the same year, Dr O. Demus, in his *Romanesque Mural Paintings*, said that the paintings in question were of 'the martyrdom of St. Katherine' (sic), and, after describing them as 'the work of a provincial artist', dated them as being of 'the second or third decade of the 13th century', thereby putting them about a century later than his predecessors.¹⁴

It remains to be added, to conclude this survey of the authorities, that the views of the *Victoria County History of Gloucestershire* on Stowell remain to be published, while no mention of any significance as to the wall-paintings in the south transept is to be found in the *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, of which it may be added that its first official visit to Stowell after the discovery of the wall-paintings shortly before 1897 took place in 1939.¹⁵

In attempting to make up his own mind on contradictory interpretations of medieval wall-paintings the modern student is handicapped unless there are in existence drawings or

photographs showing the position before and after each restoration, in the course of the last of which, the latest methods of cleaning and of treatment of the plaster will doubtless have revealed aspects of the painting not previously visible. Normally such documentation is not to be had, but fortunately in the present case there is the comparison which, in addition to the written descriptions, can be made between the wall-paintings as they now exist and the Plates available in Tristram, while Keyser's interpretation can be read subject to the amendments of both Tristram and whoever restored the wall-paintings after Tristram's volume had been published. Thus, whereas the wall-painting shown in PLATE I was originally described by Keyser as having a knight kneeling below, and an angel in the tier above, Tristram drew the kneeling man as being engaged in the not notably chivalric task of plying a pair of bellows, while as to the upper tier of the same painting, his Supplementary Plate 12a includes, as already mentioned, the whole of his drawing of it, that is to say, hardly anything. Today, however, while Keyser's kneeling knight can be discounted in favour of Tristram's bellows-plier, as being a more likely participant in the martyrdom in question, what Keyser saw as an angel and Tristram wrote off as indecipherable, is now revealed, thanks to the restoration which must have been carried out since their time, as a horseman, although only a fragmentary one. What has now been made clear is that this horseman is riding in the direction of the spectator's right, and that there can be seen the horse's neck, underbelly, and two front legs, with the rider's bare foot between them. The present writer, though no horseman himself, cannot help thinking that this unorthodox posture was more to be expected of the White Knight than of an ordinary rider. Also clearly visible are the horseman's bent right hand and arm, and perhaps his left hand, holding what are presumably the vestiges of the bridle. What may be part of his head and face are also to be seen. Another difference between the previous records and this wall-painting as it now exists, though no doubt a minor one, is that whereas Tristram's Supplementary Plate 12a shows the man with the rake on the lower tier as being bare-headed, what was his nose in Tristram seems now to have become the peak of a close-fitting cap or helmet. The fact that the prongs of his rake have disappeared in the course of time is of course quite understandable.

In these circumstances, it would have been of great assistance if whoever was responsible for the latest restoration which, doubtless due to the most modern methods of cleaning and treatment, has given us the fragmentary horseman in place of Keyser's angel and Tristram's indecipherability, had left a public record of the restoration, which could, for example, have possibly thrown some light on the former St. Catherine and her wheel, referred to by Hobart Bird, Tristram, and Carleton Williams. Unfortunately a search by the present writer has failed to reveal any authorities on the wall-paintings at Stowell other than those already mentioned.¹⁶

It therefore becomes necessary, in seeking for an interpretation of these fragments, to go back to first principles and to consider what it is that identifies the wall-paintings in the south transept as relating to St. Margaret of Antioch (or possibly to St. Catherine of Alexandria) in the first place. On a purely statistical basis, either of them would be a safe suggestion to make, since, with the exception of course of the Virgin Mary, St. Catherine was, according to Keyser's *List of Buildings having Mural Decoration* (1883), the most popular of women saints as a subject for an English medieval wall-painting, while St. Margaret came third.¹⁷ Indeed, without even having to leave the boundaries of Gloucestershire, one need go no further than the parish church at Hailes to find *both* these saints juxtaposed on either side of the altar. It can readily be agreed that the figures shown on the left of PLATE II do indeed represent a trial scene and those on the right are even more likely to represent an executioner about to carry out the beheading of his kneeling victim, with the fragmentary figure on the extreme right probably being all that remains of whoever ordered the execution to take place. No previous writer has suggested that the martyr might be a man, and if the victim is in fact a woman, these scenes would apply to either of the

saints in question (and to many others) were it not for the fact that the executioner is, unusually, holding the kneeling figure by the top of the head, and consequently by the hair. It is a characteristic of the stories about St. Margaret that her hair seems to have had a fascination for her tormentors; Réau, in his monumental dictionary of religious iconography, mentions a preliminary torture, in which she was 'whipped, suspended by her hair from a gibbet',¹⁸ which scene is portrayed in the wall-painting of her martyrdom at Little Kimble, in Bucks, where she is shown, in Tristram's words, 'stripped to the waist, and with arms upraised and hair tied to a horizontal bar, standing between two executioners wielding staves'.¹⁹ At the same church she kneels before her final executioner who holds her, to quote Tristram again, with 'the head dragged forward by the hair as the executioner strikes with his sword'²⁰ – a description equally applicable to the scene in PLATE II at Stowell. This is also what is probably happening in the final scene of the St. Margaret cycle of wall-paintings at Charlwood, near Crawley.

It seems therefore reasonable to accept that the wall-painting shown in PLATE II does indeed represent a fragment from the closing scenes of the life of St. Margaret, rather than that of any other woman saint, and consequently represents also the starting point for the assumption made by the previous writers that if one fragment relates to her, so must all the others. The newly discovered horseman would also be consistent with the legend of this saint, since in the St. Margaret cycle at Charlwood, already mentioned, the Prefect Olybrius is shown in the opening sequence as a horseman riding through the forest to offer the saint the choice between renunciation of Christianity and marriage to him, or martyrdom; while, no doubt symbolically, the hound accompanying him pursues a hare.

Before finally accepting this suggestion that the horseman in PLATE I is also part of the St. Margaret cycle, it is as well, however, to have in mind Fr. Gervase Mathew's warning in connection with the interpretation of medieval wall-paintings, namely, that 'scholars may have exercised too much ingenuity in searching for consistent over-all designs among the jumbled fragments. The presence of some recognised iconographic detail cannot prove that the scheme to which it belongs was ever rendered in completion . . .'²¹ Apart from the small scale of the figures in these wall-paintings and the fact that the paintings are arranged in tiers, both of which factors imply that there could have been several entirely different stories in the original, complete, scheme for the painting of the transept as a whole, horsemen in medieval wall-paintings do, after all, figure in entirely separate contexts from that of the life of St. Margaret, and in some of them play a more dominant role. Thus, to confine examples to churches having wall-paintings of the same period as those at Stowell (taken from Caiger-Smith's 'List of principal surviving examples of Romanesque paintings'²²), at Claverly, in Shropshire, the horsemen are knights from the *Psychomachia* of Prudentius; at Clayton, in West Sussex, there is not only a devil on horseback but also one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse; at Hardham, in the same county, the horseman is St. George. On the other hand, the Olybrius at Charlwood is not Romanesque but 14th century,²³ and no other example of his depiction as a horseman is known to the present writer in any other surviving English medieval wall-painting. All this does not preclude the horseman at Stowell from being Olybrius, but there is such a variety of other possibilities that the odds seem to be against it; unfortunately, there is now no reason to suppose that his identity can ever now be anything but conjectural.

Moreover, again with Fr. Mathew's caution in mind, even if the horseman were Olybrius, is the martyr in the tier below him necessarily St. Margaret? Since the sequence adopted in telling stories in tiers of wall-paintings is usually longitudinal rather than vertical, the mere fact that one character is on a tier above another is no evidence that there is any connection between them; thus the St. George at Hardham, already mentioned, is on a tier below one dealing with the Nativity. Another aspect of the matter is that, quite apart from the fact that Keyser eventually

conjectured that the lower tier shown in PLATE I represented the tortures of the 'condemned', it is hard to appreciate from Tristram's own Plates how he could be dogmatic about the saint in question being a woman, while what he describes as a cauldron looks too open-sided to be such a vessel. Nor is the precise form of torture, as described by Tristram, to which the victim is being subjected part of the usual St. Margaret canon. Réau certainly says that she was subjected to extreme heat applied in various forms – as he says, 'so horrible that the tyrant himself, unable to bear the sight of them, covered his eyes with the hem of his robe'²⁴ – but none of these tortures detailed by Réau corresponds to what Tristram saw as being carried out in his painting. Indeed, the culmination of this saint's torments, and the one most characteristic and most frequently displayed (though not in the surviving wall-paintings at Stowell), was not torture by fire in any of its forms, but to have been swallowed by Satan in the form of a dragon, from whose inside she was able miraculously to extricate herself by the power of the Cross. The supreme importance of this element of her martyrdom is indicated by the fact that the dragon became her attribute or emblem.²⁵ On the other hand, to be roasted over a fire on a gridiron (though not in a cauldron) is the form of torment most commonly associated with St. Lawrence, and was the final, and fatal, of a whole series of tortures applied to him; the importance of the gridiron in his case is indicated by it becoming the attribute or emblem of this saint.²⁶ The mode of his execution is exemplified in a 'mid-12th century (?)' wall-painting at Berzé-la-Ville, in France, where two torturers are shown using long-handled implements (presumably so that they themselves could keep a safe distance from the heat) which end in the form of pitchforks, but with widely-spaced prongs, as a means of holding the saint down on the gridiron, since, though he is naked and has his hands bound in front of him, he does not appear to be secured to the gridiron itself in any way.²⁷ Similar tools are shown being used by some of the devils in the Doom wall-painting at Chaldon, in Surrey, for similar purposes.²⁸ This type of utensil thus has at least its long handle in common with the tool described and drawn by Tristram as a rake. Moreover, the case of St. Lawrence is a reminder that, if in fact it were St. Margaret being tortured in the same way that he was, then such treatment would have proved fatal, and no decapitation such as all wall-paintings depicting her end of which the present writer is aware, and all the modern authorities²⁹ to whom he has referred, are agreed upon, would in fact have been necessary finally to despatch her. All in all, therefore, the martyr in the wall-painting represented in PLATE I is almost certainly not St. Margaret and there is not even any certainty that the martyr in question is in fact a woman. The inclusion of the stories of several different saints in wall-paintings in the same church, often cheek by jowl with entirely different subjects, all of which may be on separate tiers, is common form in English medieval wall-painting, and is responsible for producing the strange juxtapositions already mentioned, so that pictures on the same wall of St. Margaret and of St. Lawrence would have been by no means unusual.

To sum up the various questions raised by the wall-paintings in the south transept at Stowell, in the painting shown in PLATE I the horseman could possibly be the Prefect Olybrius, but is more likely to be someone else whose identity cannot now be established, but the martyr shown in the same Plate is probably not St. Margaret but could well be St. Lawrence. It is just theoretically possible that he might be St. Vincent of Saragossa, who, like St. Lawrence, was martyred long before the date of the wall-paintings and by the same means;³⁰ this however is hardly likely in practice, since this would make it the only representation of St. Vincent in English medieval wall-paintings.³¹ As to the wall-painting illustrated in PLATE II, it is reasonably certain that the martyr in this case is indeed St. Margaret.

It should perhaps be added that, since the foregoing refers on occasion to her story being a legend, modern criticism is even more censorious, describing it as 'a fictitious romance' and 'this farrago', while even St. Lawrence's sufferings are now thought to be exaggerated, in that he was

more likely to have been beheaded;³² moreover, since 1 January 1970, St. Margaret (and indeed St. Catherine, also, for that matter) have both been removed from the Roman Calendar³³ on the grounds, it is understood, that it is doubtful whether they ever existed.³⁴

Notes

1. *Archaeologia*, xlvi (1885), 456–464, at p. 462.
2. *Proc. Soc. Antiquaries*, 2nd series xvii (1897–99), 382–386, at p. 382.
3. *Ibid.*, 384.
4. *Ibid.*, 386.
5. *Archaeol. Jnl.*, lviii (1901), 51, 52.
6. W. Hobart Bird, *Ancient Mural Paintings in the Churches of Gloucs.*, (1927), 30.
7. E.W. Tristram, *English Medieval Wall Painting: the 12th century*, (1944), 46. This extract is quoted by kind permission of the publishers, the Oxford University Press.
8. *Ibid.*, 147, 148.
9. I am indebted to Miss Jean D. Hamilton, Senior Research Assistant in the Prints and Drawings and Photograph Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum, for this information.
10. At p. 195.
11. E. Carleton Williams, 'Mural Paintings of St. Catherine in England', *Jnl. British Archaeol. Assn.*, n.s. 3, xix (1956) 20–33, at p. 33.
12. A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings*, (1963), 143.
13. D. Verey, *Gloucs. I, The Cotswolds*, (1970), 420.
14. O. Demus, *Romanesque Mural Paintings*, (1970), 511, 512.
15. *Trans. BGAS*, lxi (1939), 23–24.
16. I am most grateful to Mr. John Hopkins, Librarian of the Society of Antiquaries, for confirming from his admirably comprehensive Index that this is so.
17. From the statistical analysis of Keyser's *List* contained in F. Kendon, *Mural Paintings in English Churches during the Middle Ages*, (1923), App. III.
18. L. Réau, *Iconographie de l'art Chrétien*, (Paris, 1958), III ii, 878, roughly translated by the present writer.
19. E.W. Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the 14th century*, (1955), 188.
20. *Ibid.*
21. G. Mathew, *The Court of Richard II*, (1968), 96.
22. Caiger-Smith, *op. cit.*, n. 12, 10, 11.
23. *Ibid.*, 176.
24. Réau, *op. cit.*, n. 18, 878.
25. G. Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, (1972), 16.
26. *Ibid.*, 175.
27. Reproduced as Plate 179 in D. Talbot Rice, *A Concise History of Painting from Prehistory to the 13th Century*, (1967), the queried dating being given on p. 277.
28. Reproduced as Fig. 94 in J.C. Wall, *Medieval Wall Paintings*, (not dated, but believed to be c. 1913).
29. See the following:— A.B.C. Dunbar, *A Dictionary of Saintly Women*, ii (1905), 12; S. Baring-Gould, *Lives of the Saints* viii (1914), 487; Réau, *op. cit.*, n. 18, 878; D. Attwater, *Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, (1970), 228; D. Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, (1978), 260.
30. Attwater, *op. cit.*, n. 29, 335, 336.
31. Kendon, *op. cit.*, n. 17, Appendix III.
32. Attwater, *op. cit.*, n. 29, 214, 228.
33. Farmer, *op. cit.*, n. 29, xix, the authority given being the *Calendarium Romanum*, (1969).
34. *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, (1969), column 23376A; here, however, the authority given is a decree entitled *Paschalis Mysterii* approved by Pope Paul VI on 14th February, 1969, which authorised a revised Calendar issued by the Vatican on 9th May of that year which came into effect on 1st January, 1970. No doubt it is a case of the greater including the less.

May 1983