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Deerhurst**

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The priory church of St. Mary at Deerhurst represents one of the best preserved monuments of Anglo-Saxon architecture in England. The building shows, in addition, some of the finest examples of Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture, consisting of label-stops in the form of animal heads in the interior, projecting animal heads (*prokrossoi*) over some of the external windows, and a font.¹ The present study focuses on two wall panels depicting figures. Both of them are *in situ* and so are relevant to the dating of the building within the 9th century on the basis of their figure-style and iconography. They also illustrate the use of relief decoration in architecture.

The better known of the panels depicts the bust of an angel and is set in the exterior of the gable of the remaining wall of polygonal apse. This panel was discovered in 1922 when some of the buildings close to the church were demolished. Since then, it has captured the attention of art historians because of the quality of the carving and its preservation *in situ*.²

The other panel is set in the wall above the west doorway connecting the ground floor of the tower with the body of the church; it represents the image of the Virgin and Child. Because of the enigmatic character of this carving, it has not been the subject of a detailed discussion in the past and no close examples have been found in England to suggest a date for it within the Anglo-Saxon period. Although early references exist for this carving, its style and iconography were first studied to some extent by Casson and Talbot Rice in 1933 and 1952 respectively.³

This study will emphasize the importance of the panel of the Virgin and Child at Deerhurst for a better understanding of Anglo-Saxon figure style. The carving is also relevant to the general iconography of the church at Deerhurst, and thus it will be examined first.

The Panel of the Virgin and Child

The earliest recorded example of a wall relief depicting the Virgin and Child in England is that above the inner west doorway in the porch of the church at Deerhurst. This panel is of sub-rectangular shape and it has a round top. It measures 102 cm high × 40 cm wide at its base. The approximate depth of carving is 5 cm.

The relief (Fig. 1) represents a frontally placed figure of a female saint standing beneath an arch and holding an oval disc against her chest. Only the basic outline of the figure is carved, such as its head surrounded by a halo. This feature suggests the use of a technique by which the representation was completed to a great extent by painting the carving. Therefore, the relief is progressively higher towards the face, which consists of a flat surface with no carved facial traits depicted on it. The figure is dressed in a long tunic, with no folds or carved ornament on it. Only a smooth curve extends between the legs, thus articulating the garment. The ends of a drapery hang over the arms of the figure and extend downwards on either side.

This full-length figure is framed by an arch of one order, which emphasizes her individuality. The flat, round-headed arch rests on two pilasters with stepped capitals. The bottom shows a



Fig. 1. Wall relief of the Virgin and Child, St. Mary's church, Deerhurst.

rectangular-shaped platform on which the figure stands. The platform or dais is surrounded by a flat border; the internal space is decorated in the form of three flat pilasters with double-stepped capitals and bases. Three plain roundels are carved on this frame: one at the top of the arch, the other two on the lower corners of the dais.

The structural simplicity of the frame is reminiscent, for instance, of the Canon Tables depicted in the *Maeseyc Gospels* (Maeseyc, church of St. Catherine, Trèsor, s.n., ff. 6–7v.), dated to the first half of 8th century.⁴ The arch head is separated from the pillars by double slab capitals. Triple slab capitals are found in Insular art, e.g. the Canon Tables in the *Codex Amiatinus* (Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS. Amiatino 1), dated before A.D. 716, and on free-standing crosses like Otley I (Yorks.), belonging to the late 8th or early 9th century, where the arches surround the heads of the Apostles.⁵ The double slab capitals on the Deerhurst panel may derive from a similar source. Capitals in the form of double impostes are, however, more difficult to parallel, although a similar feature is to be seen in a miniature representing St. Luke in the *Book of Cerne* (Cambridge, University Library, MS. L1.1.10, f. 21v.), dated c. 820–840.⁶

The comparison of the Deerhurst figure with other images placed under arches, such as those on the shaft of the Otley I cross, is also of interest with regard to the position of the figures with respect to their frames. Thus, there is a sense of economy in the depiction of these carvings, because the space between the figures and their frames has been reduced to a minimum. The head of the Deerhurst figure, for instance, fills the arch's semicircular space, while the rest of her body is about the same height as the supporting pilasters.

The platform on which the figure stands consists of a rectangular carved stone which bears sculptural decoration in the form of a step-pattern. Stepped capitals and bases are a common feature in Insular manuscript illumination: e.g. the Canon Tables in a Vatican Library manuscript (Biblioteca Apostolica Barberini, MS. lat. 570, f. 1), dated to the second half of the 8th century; and on sculpture, such as the arch framing the figure of the angel in the church of Breedon-on-the-Hill (Leics.), dated to the early 9th century.⁷

The results of a study of the frame of the full-length figure at Deerhurst are thus consistent with a date of around the 9th century for the carving. Apart from the general layout of this figure, no other details seem to have been carved; it is probable therefore that the panel was originally painted. An analogous carving technique is to be found elsewhere, as on the arch of the north chapel in Britford church (Wilts.), where two carved panels—probably dated to the 9th century—depict the bases of pilasters.⁸ As at Deerhurst, these show flat surfaces softly projecting from the background and were, presumably, originally painted. This technique of combining carved and painted decoration in architectural contexts was used until a later date in England, as it occurs on an early 11th-century wall panel in the church of St. Peter in Barton-upon-Humber (Lincs.), depicting the incised head of a man.⁹

The disc or the *imago clipeata* of the Child held by the Deerhurst figure is the attribute which finally identifies this female saint as the Virgin Mary. Portraits in the form of an *imago clipeata*, in which a circular frame encircles the head or bust of the portrayed, are often represented on Christian antiquities.¹⁰ Its antecedents are well recorded in Classical art: funerary portraits enclosed in *clipea* were depicted to honour a dead person, as on mid 3rd- to early 4th-century Roman *sarcophagi* in the British Museum or on a 4th-century *sarcophagus* of Curcia Cacia in Pretestato Museum, Rome.¹¹ This mode of presentation was used unchanged on Christian *sarcophagi*, as on the 6th-century tomb of St. Prosdocimus at Padua.¹²

The Romans also used the *imago clipeata* formula to represent emperors or holders of high administrative posts, such as consuls. The Christians continued this practice, but at the same time they extended the use of the formula to honour their saints, as on the 7th-century icon in



Fig. 2. Miniature from a Syriac Bible (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. Syr. 341, f. 118: reproduced in J. Leroy, *Les manuscrits Syriaques à peintures conservés dans les bibliothèques d'Europe et d'Orient* (Paris, 1964), pl. 43, fig. 2).

encaustic of St. Peter from Mount Sinai.¹³ The use of *clipea* was also popular when representing the bust-portraits of Christ and the Apostles in different media, such as the chancel arch mosaics in the Archbishop's Chapel (c. 494–519) and in the church of St. Vitale (c. 540 to 548), both at Ravenna.¹⁴ This early Christian and Byzantine tradition of representing the busts of the Apostles enclosed in *clipea* was soon adopted in Anglo-Saxon art. The oldest Latin manuscripts showing the portraits of the Apostles in this manner are three Insular Gospel Books. In the early 8th-century *Maeseeyck Gospels* the Canon Tables are arranged in single and double arches, each with a bust figure in a *clipeum* and placed at the top (ff. 1–5); the arches are also surmounted by the *imagines clipeatae* of the Apostles (as on ff. 6–9v.). The latter motif is also shown in the *Trier Gospels* (Domschatz, Codex 61, 134, f. 10) of the second quarter of the 8th century.¹⁵ The *imago clipeata* formula is found also in the schemata pages in the *Codex Amiatinus* 1 (f. 5), possibly a copy of a Greek manuscript such as the *Cassiodorus Codex Grandior*.¹⁶

The closest iconographical parallels for Deerhurst come from remote sources originating in the eastern regions of the Byzantine empire between the 7th and the 8th centuries. The most remarkable is a miniature (Fig. 2) from a late 6th-century Syriac Bible perhaps from Siirt, East Turkey (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. Syr. 341, f. 118).¹⁷ This is placed at the beginning of the Book of Proverbs and it depicts three figures. It is the middle figure that is particularly relevant to this discussion, for it is a standing female holding a child in a *clipeum*. She is dressed in a long robe, as on the Deerhurst panel, and its hem rests on her feet. She also wears a cloak covering her shoulders and arms, falling to knee length and ending in a series of decorative tassels. She is a veiled figure; although not haloed, her sanctity is indicated by a small cross placed on her head. Also, as at Deerhurst, the figure holds the *imago clipeata* against her chest. The child within the *clipeum* is a nimbed figure placed frontally. In the illustration, the Virgin holding the *imago clipeata* of the Christ-Child stands between King Solomon (author of the Book of Proverbs) and a female figure, probably a personification of the Church.¹⁸ This late 6th-century miniature represents Christ as the source of Wisdom, placed between Solomon—symbolizing the Old Testament or a prefiguration of Christ (I Chronicles 29, 22–3)—and the Church as the symbol of the New Testament.¹⁹ Another miniature depicting a similar subject is the Adoration of the Magi in the Armenian *Etchmiadzin Gospels* (Yerevan, Matenadaran MS. 2374: formerly MS. 229), dated to the end of the 6th or the beginning of the 7th century.²⁰

Further examples of the Virgin holding the *clipeum* of the child are found in metalwork, particularly on seals and bracteates. From the 6th to the beginning of the 7th century the Byzantine emperors used a type of seal with the depiction of the Virgin on the reverse, holding the *clipeum* with the image of the Child. The earliest known examples were issued by Justinian I (527–565) and Tiberius II (578–582?); they show the bust of St. Mary holding the image of the Child.²¹ The full-length figure of the Virgin first appears on Maurice's seals (582–602) and continued to be used by his successors, such as Herakleios, Constans II and his sons (c. 616–668).²² These seals are of particular interest for the iconography of the Virgin because they show her in the standing position, frontally placed, as at Deerhurst.

A fresco in a niche in the north nave of the church of Santa Maria Antiqua, in Rome, shows another parallel for the same iconographic type.²³ This wall painting (Fig. 3) may be dated within the 8th century, considering that the aisles of the church were redecorated during the papacy of Paul I, between 757 and 767.²⁴ Here, the enthroned Virgin holding the *clipeum* of the Child is represented between St. Anne and St. Mary as a child on the left side and St. Elizabeth and St. John the Baptist as a child on the right.

Another interesting wall painting is found in the east apse of a funerary chapel at Bawit (St. Apollus, chapel XXVIII), Egypt, dated between the late 6th and the 7th century, where the Virgin Mary is shown seated on a throne flanked by two angels.²⁵ The main difference from

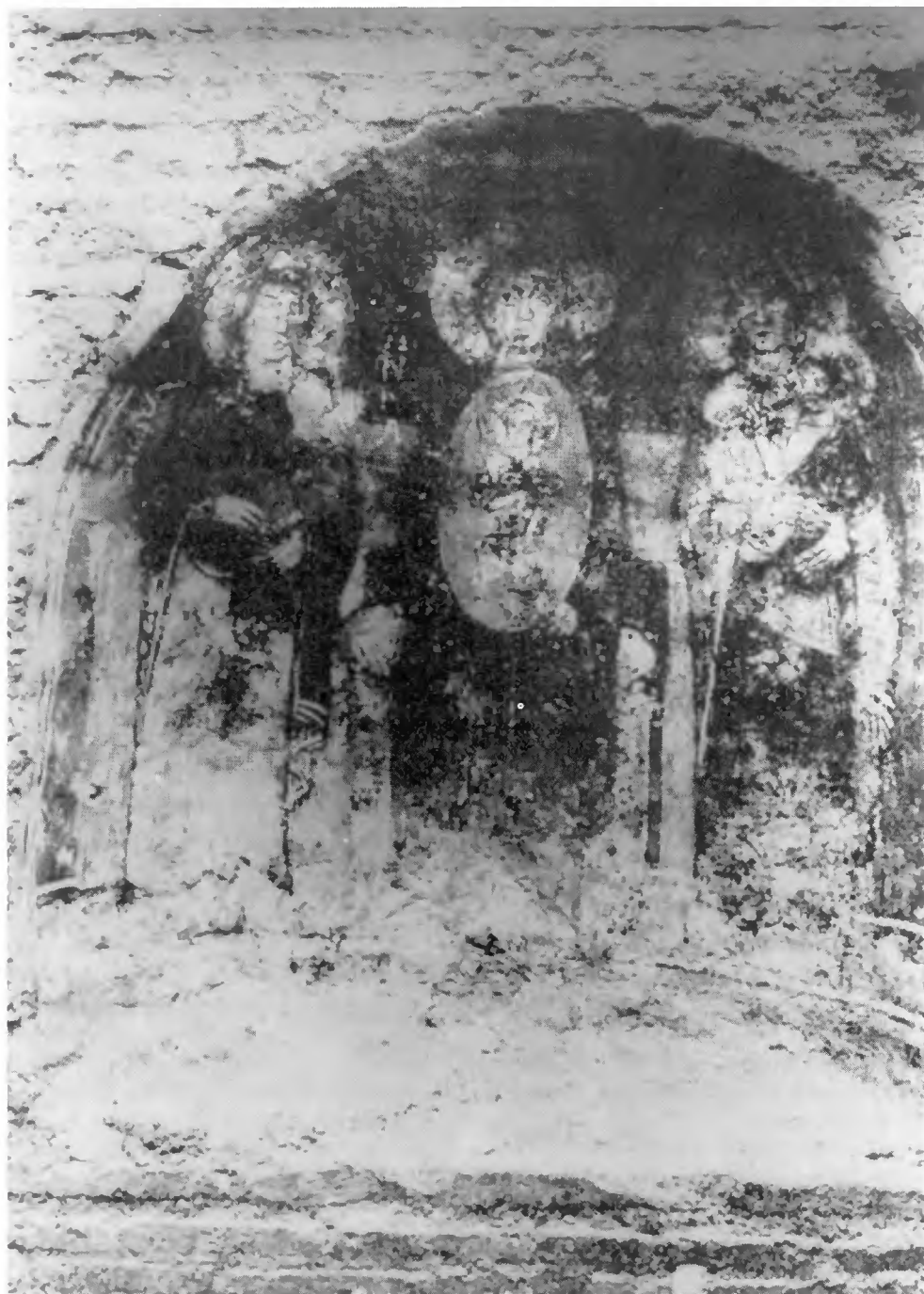


Fig. 3 Wall painting in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome (W. de Grüneisen, 'Studi iconografici in Santa Maria Antiqua', *Archivio della R. Società Romana di Storia Patria* 29, 89, fig. 1).

other depictions of this theme is that the Child is not placed precisely in the centre of the composition: the Virgin holds the *clipeum* resting on her left knee, slightly placed to one side. This fresco is perhaps the clearest demonstration that the Child in the *clipeum* represents the 'portrait of the Divinity' or an individual icon separate from that of the Virgin. In fact the Virgin is *displaying* the portative icon of the Child. Her main role here is to introduce the image of Jesus to the faithful. The *imago clipeata* of the Christ-Child may not therefore be related to the mystery of the Incarnation. Certainly, the Bawit wall painting can be compared to those triumphal secular portraits showing the holders of high administrative titles such as emperors and consuls.

A particularly good example for illustrating the origins of this iconographical subject is the consular diptych of Basil (A.D. 480).²⁶ The fragment of this ivory diptych kept in Castello Sforcesco, Milan, represents the figure of a Victory displaying the portrait of the consul Basil in the form of a portative image.²⁷ In both cases, in Basil's diptych and in chapel XXVIII at Bawit, the images of the consul and of the Child are being introduced to the public and to the faithful respectively. This shows how a secular motif has been adapted to a religious context.

Similarly, it has been observed that the image of the Virgin on the reverse of a seal of emperor Maurice (582–602) takes the place of the Nike which decorated the seals of his predecessors Anastasios I (491–518) and Justinian I (527–565).²⁸ Thus, there has been a substitution of the depiction of the Victory with that of St. Mary, the two crosses flanking the figure of the Nike still remaining in the representation of the Virgin.²⁹

From the examples that have been discussed above, the theme of the Virgin displaying the *imago clipeata* of the Child, as it appears at Deerhurst, seems to have its origins in the 5th or 6th centuries. This type could be defined as 'the icon inside the icon': the icon of the Virgin displaying the icon of the Child. Unfortunately, except for the case at Deerhurst, no other example has survived carved on stone. The subject has not been recorded elsewhere in Europe apart from a Byzantine context in the eastern Mediterranean.

Of the Anglo-Saxon wall panels found in England, only a few are iconic representations of the Virgin Mary that may be considered as individual devotional subjects, thus sharing the hieratic character of the Deerhurst figure. An early 9th-century panel in the church of Breedon-on-the-Hill depicts the veiled figure of a woman under an arch.³⁰ She holds a book in her left, veiled hand, and gives the blessing with her right hand. The iconic character of this hieratic, frontally placed bust suggests that it represents the Virgin Mary, or another female saint, perhaps originally as part of a series of similar images. An early reference for the use of such panels in Anglo-Saxon buildings is given by Bede, who records that the treasures brought by Benedict Biscop included an icon of the Virgin.³¹ The panels used at Wearmouth might have had iconographical analogies to those 6th-century marble panels from the church of Agios Polyeyktos at Saraçhane, Istanbul, which have some similarities with the Breedon veiled figure.³²

There is a clear distinction between the representation of the Virgin displaying the clipeated image of the Child, as shown at Deerhurst, and other images depicting the theme of the Virgin as the throne of Wisdom, the seat of the incarnate Christ, in the late Anglo-Saxon period.³³ In Inglesham church (Wilts.), a wall panel, used sometime as a sundial, shows the Virgin seated on a throne placed in profile. A date in the late 11th or early 12th century for this relief is supported by the inscription on the top, reading + MARIA,³⁴ and by the striking iconographical similarities it shares with a wall relief at the church of St. Stephen by Launceston (Cornwall), for which a similar date can be proposed.³⁵ Both carvings not only depict common features, such as the Child seated across the Mother's lap, the Hand of God giving the benediction as a sign of divine intervention, or Mary's face looking away. These panels also share other details, such as the

Virgin's veil passing behind the throne and the right hand of Jesus placed near his mother's shoulder in a gesture of blessing.

This type of representation can be compared to a carving of the same theme depicted on the wooden coffin of St. Cuthbert (now in Durham cathedral), dated to the late 7th century.³⁶ This iconographical model, as in the case of Deerhurst, seems to have its origins in Mediterranean art before the 7th century. An early example of this type is carved on a coffin lid kept in Barcelona (Museo de Historia de la Ciudad), dated *c.* 315–335.³⁷ This type has, however, a more intimate character which is apparently absent in the panel of the Virgin and Child at Deerhurst. The latter represents a more innovative solution, although it might have been less popular due to the more severe character of the images. A more humane depiction of the Virgin was probably preferred by the faithful and, therefore, the theme of the maternity of Mary was perhaps closer to them.

The Angel Panel

The panel set in the remaining wall of the polygonal apse at Deerhurst depicts the bust of an angel, carved in high relief, in a different style from the figurative panel of the Virgin and Child discussed above. The angel (Fig. 4) is carved on a single panel of rectangular shape, measuring approximately 70 cm high × 50 cm wide. This is framed by a damaged flat border; the dark



Fig. 4 Wall relief depicting the bust of an angel, St. Mary's church, Deerhurst.

shaded area running diagonally across the lower half of the slab, may have been caused by a beam or wooden sloping roof which rested on this side of the apse before the panel was discovered in 1922.

Like the early 9th-century relief depicting an archangel at Breedon-on-the-Hill, the Deerhurst angel shows facial traits inspired by Classical conventions. Thus, both have been given a solemn expression, a prominent chin and pursed lips, and curly hair fastened by a diadem. The carver of the Breedon figure was, however, more familiar with the Classical models, as can be observed from the more naturalistic depiction of the hair and sense of proportion for the facial traits. Parallels for the Breedon angel can be found in early Christian and Byzantine art, e.g. the 5th- or 6th-century figure of an archangel carved on the leaf of an ivory diptych in the British Museum, London, or on the ivory plaque from a diptych, dated to the middle of the 6th century and kept in the Museum of Byzantine Art in Berlin, depicting the Virgin and Child flanked by two angels.³⁸

Stylistically, the Deerhurst panel shows the sculptor's attempt to follow Classical models, but the result is less naturalistic. This interpretation of the figure style can be compared to some illustrations in 8th- and 9th-century manuscripts, such as the busts of the Apostles in the Ascension scene in the *Turin Gospels* (Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, Cod. 0. IV. 20, f. 1v.), dated to the first half of the 9th century.³⁹

Contemporary 9th-century busts of angels are those carved on two fragments from a strip-frieze in St. Margaret's church, Fletton (Cambs.), similar in style to the figure of St. Michael kept in the same building.⁴⁰ These figures represent a different interpretation of Classical models from the 9th-century angel panels at Breedon and Deerhurst. The figure of St. Michael and the busts of angels at Fletton show the assimilation of the Classic conventions in figure style and their adaptation to Anglo-Saxon craftsmanship. A similar adaptation is observed in other works of the 8th and 9th centuries, like the angels on the 8th-century ivory plaques from St. Martin's church at Genoels Enderen, Belgium.⁴¹ Similarly, the late 10th- or early 11th-century panels depicting flying angels in St. Laurence's church, Bradford-on-Avon (Wilts.), and Winterbourne Steepleton (Dorset) show the adaptation of Classical models in Anglo-Saxon art.⁴²

As in the case of the Deerhurst Virgin and Child and the Breedon angel, the notable similarities between the figures and the Classical or Byzantine examples suggest that the sculptors had a direct knowledge of Classical models and that they copied them. These models probably arrived in England in the form of portable objects with figures depicted on metalwork, ivory, wood, paintings or textiles. This is also likely to be the case of the Deerhurst angel: the strong iconic character of the figure and details such as the ends of the diadem seen at either side of his face may support the use of Classical models. It is not completely clear, however, whether the carving of the angel is a direct copy of a Classical model, as is suggested for the Virgin and Child. This is mainly because the style of the facial traits is less naturalistic than on the Classic or Byzantine material.

The remarkable differences in style between the two figurative wall panels at Deerhurst suggest that they were carved by different people. It is clear that the carvings are not only different in their style but also in their carving technique, paintings having an important role in the completion of the Virgin and Child relief. It is also interesting to compare the two carvings with the animal heads depicted on the label-stops of the arches on the interior of the west doorway and on the chancel arch.⁴³ These animal heads are carved in a style like that of a similar motif depicted on metalwork. In this case, the animal motifs have their closest parallels not in the Classic and Byzantine models, as in the case of the two figurative panels, but in Anglo-Saxon art of the 9th century.⁴⁴

The Setting of the Wall Panels

The *in situ* setting of the figurative wall panels at Deerhurst indicates the importance of the use of wall reliefs in Anglo-Saxon buildings. The setting of these panels emphasizes the symbolic or liturgical importance of specific areas in the general iconography of the building.

Thus the position of the panel of the Virgin and Child at the entrance to the building—dedicated to St. Mary—indicates the importance of the cult of the Virgin Mary, who introduces the Word, Christ, to those crossing the threshold of the church. It is important to observe that the panel in the ground storey of the west porch (now tower) is set *above* the doorway. This means that the panel is independent from the structure of the door, unlike tympana and lintels, and reinforces the dominant position of the image at the entrance to the church.

The setting of the angel panel in the gable of the remaining wall of the polygonal apse is also important to our knowledge of the use of wall reliefs in buildings. In fact, this is the only surviving example in England for the use of figurative reliefs in the exterior of apses in the Anglo-Saxon period. The setting of this panel is reinforced by the use of pilaster-strips with a twofold function. One function is decorative, visually articulating the walls of the apse. The other function of the pilaster-strips, made of dressed masonry, is structural giving strength to the fabric built of rubble. In this context, the angel panel sits comfortably in a frame made of pilaster-strips and a string-course, which is both decorative and structural thus supporting the weight of the slab within the gable. It is likely that the panel was originally part of a larger programme formed by a series of panels set in the other walls of the apse. Perhaps other figures of angels occupied positions like that of the surviving relief. Such a programme might have been related to the iconography of St. Mary, to whom the church is dedicated: there is evidence elsewhere of large-scale programmes representing visions of Heaven with the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Heaven, and angels.⁴⁵

The Deerhurst reliefs are most relevant to the study of wall panels and their position in buildings of the Anglo-Saxon period, especially at a time when only few other forms of wall decoration, such as mural paintings, survive. The earliest remaining examples of wall paintings depicting figures are dated to the late 9th century: i.e. a fragment from Winchester New Minster kept at the Winchester City Museum.⁴⁶ The variety of sculptural themes and motifs within a single building provides an iconographical unity which makes Deerhurst priory church unique as a complete and complex monument of the 9th century.

Notes

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