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**A Possible Late Saxon Sculptural Tribute to St Jordan of Bristol:
“Christ Preaching in Limbo” otherwise “The Harrowing of Hell”
bas-relief in Bristol Cathedral**

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A Possible Late Saxon Sculptural Tribute to St Jordan of Bristol: ‘Christ Preaching in Limbo’ otherwise ‘The Harrowing of Hell’ bas-relief in Bristol Cathedral.

By DAVID H. HIGGINS

Introduction

The bas-relief traditionally named ‘the Harrowing of Hell’ (lit. ‘the spoiling’ or ‘plundering’ of Hell), now displayed in the south transept of Bristol cathedral, appears to have come to light amongst masonry rubble during repairs to the cathedral’s chapter house following the devastations of the Bristol Riots of 1831 (Fig. 1). At the time that these necessary works were put in hand, the opportunity was taken to return the chapter house floor, which had been raised by a metre or so in 1713, to the original level of the 12th century. The bas-relief in question had therefore lain – as far as reports nearest the time can be trusted – amongst a dozen other disoriented and empty coffins and lids of the now discarded infill, *no lower than* the floor level of Anglo-Norman times.¹ From all this, two conclusions can be drawn: first, the bas-relief’s discovery post 1831 was a rediscovery and, second, its earlier epiphany can be dated at any time from its creation (hitherto judged to have been in the first half of the 11th century but which this author argues below to have been more feasibly in the second half) up to 1713. Where it had lain before 1713 is a matter of speculation, but it is worthy of note that by that date the Anglo-Saxon chapel of St Jordan on College Green (the old abbey’s ‘sanctuary’ or graveyard) probably no longer existed. The last sight we have of the ancient mausoleum chapel is in Millerd’s plan of 1673 (Fig. 2); but between that date and 1733, when the city’s old High Cross was re-erected on the green – probably on the site of St Jordan’s shrine – the Great Storm of 1703 had occurred, which caused widespread structural damage in Bristol as also in Oxford and elsewhere in the south of England.² It is known from Camden’s late 16th-century report that St Jordan’s chapel with its open-air ‘pulpit of stone’ stood in the centre of the ‘green plain’ between ‘a double row of trees’ (Fig. 3); trees which, from contemporary reports a little over a century later, were toppled by the tempest.³ It is a reasonable assumption that the chapel and its pulpit did not survive the catastrophe and what material treasures of stone ornamentation had been rescued from them were unceremoniously consigned to the unappreciative possession of the cathedral.⁴ The ‘Harrowing of Hell’ bas-relief – which in any

1. G. Pryce, *Notes on the Ecclesiastical and Monumental Architecture and Sculpture of the Middle Ages in Bristol* (London, 1850); P.A. Leversage, *The History of Bristol Cathedral, its Antiquities and Monuments* (Clifton, 1853); H.J. Massé, *The Cathedral Church of Bristol* (London, 1901).
2. J.F. Nicholls and T. Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present* (Bristol, 1881), III, 15.
3. William Camden, ‘Bristol, Somerset’ in *Britannia [1586]*, translated and ‘enlarged’ by R. Gough (London, 1806).
4. D.H. Higgins, *St Jordan of Bristol: From the Catacombs of Rome to College Green at Bristol* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association Pamphlet 120, 2007), 6.



Fig. 1. The bas-relief ‘Christ Preaching in Limbo’ otherwise ‘The Harrowing of Hell’ (c.1050–1100) in the south transept of Bristol cathedral.

case was unheard of before 1831 – may well have been part of this unexpected bounty. A careful reading of its iconography points to the strong possibility that it was.

However else the ‘Harrowing’ relief might have been used, it was not itself executed as a coffin lid, even though, when discovered, it is reported as lying unattached upon an empty coffin amongst the infill. As Dr Michael Smith pointed out, its shape in any case is wrong for a coffin, with an unsuitably inverted taper: it is wider by approximately 12 cm at the bottom (the foot end) than the top (the head and shoulders end), while its reverse side remained unworked and unsuitable for exact closure on a stone coffin.⁵ George Zarnecki surprisingly chose to ignore these cogent observations.⁶ Significantly therefore, when it was found in the chapter house, the ‘Harrowing of Hell’ bas-relief could not have come from *beneath* its 12th-century paved floor, where underfloor interments, not uncommon in conventual chapter houses of the period, might otherwise have lain. This is a very important consideration, since the argument had been advanced – based on what this author considers a misunderstanding of the circumstances of the bas-relief’s retrieval – that

5. M.Q. Smith, ‘The Harrowing of Hell Relief in Bristol Cathedral’, in *Trans. BGAS* 94 (1976), 101–6.

6. G. Zarnecki, J. Holt, T. Holland, *English Romanesque Art 1066–1200* (London, 1984), 150.



Fig. 2. College Green in 1673. Detail from James Millerd's map showing the school house (formerly St Jordan's chapel) to the right of the cathedral's tower.



Fig. 3. Bristol in the late medieval period. Top left: St Jordan's chapel on College Green between 'a double row of trees' as described in Camden's *Britannia* (1586).

an earlier Saxon church or chapel stood beneath the site of the chapter house itself. This now seems less probable.

The particular shape of the Bristol 'Harrowing of Hell' and its iconography invite further speculation:

(a) The taper of Bristol's relief confirms – apart from its intrinsic unsuitability as a coffin lid already discussed – that it neither functioned originally as a tomb-slab (which is normally rectangular like the examples at Bibury in Gloucestershire and Wirksworth in Derbyshire) nor as a panel (invariably rectangular) set in a decorative frieze, such as once contained the late Saxon or early Norman panels at Daglingworth in Gloucestershire or at Breedon-on-the Hill in Leicestershire.

(b) It is unlikely that the Bristol bas-relief had been part of a free-standing obelisk-style preaching-cross, since it is slab-like and worked on only one of its faces. Normally such cross shafts were square or oblong in horizontal cross-section and worked on each of their four sides, whether the cross was monolithic (carved from a single block) as at Bewcastle in Cumbria or, more commonly, constructed from multiple blocks as at Ruthwell in Dumfries, Breedon-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire, Norbury in Derbyshire, Congresbury in Somerset and Newent in Gloucestershire.

(c) Michael Smith (1976) did not rule out the bas-relief's possible employment as a *sopraporte* (a decorative feature above a doorway) but there are objections to this. Firstly, the taper of the 'Harrowing' is awkward for this role: normally in order to mitigate the problem of perspective (foreshortening), the shape of such decorations, high above the observer, tends to widen towards the top of the composition rather than towards the base. Secondly, such Romanesque enhancements are normally without frames, e.g. the crucifixion at Headbourne Worthy and the painted rood – if *in situ* – at Breamore (both Winchester area). The frameless 'Ascending Christ', now on the outside of the tower at Beverston (Gloucestershire), exaggeratedly wider at the top than the bottom, had almost certainly functioned earlier as a *sopraporte*. The Bristol relief, with its sort of taper, emphasised by the composition's heavy frame, would have been unsuitable for this role and quite without precedent.

Iconography and Theology

In the last analysis, the architectural location of Bristol's 'Harrowing of Hell' must have been determined, in its originally intended use, by the 'message' of its iconography – something which commentators to date have so far failed to discern. Much of significance and authority has been written about the origins and affinities of the artistic style of the bas-relief's imagery by Smith (1976), Oakes (2000) and Cramp (2006), but all has not yet been said about the *sense* of its iconography, its theological import. Unlike all the other more or less contemporary examples of the *anastasis* ('rising' of the Saviour after his descent into Hell) depicted in manuscript or stone, the Bristol version indicates Christ's status not simply as *Resurgens*, *Salvator* or *Victor* but first and foremost as *Praedicator* (preacher). The perspective of the Bristol 'Harrowing of Hell' (Fig. 1) – so far not remarked on – is unusual and highly sophisticated. The Saviour is depicted very much from beneath. With his neck somewhat craned, he looks down upon Adam and Eve (it is probably they) whom he *encourages* to ascend (not snatches) out of the maw of Hell; and looks down also upon Satan (whom he tramples), as any Anglo-Saxon preacher, if so minded, might have looked down from his pulpit upon both the deserving and the undeserving amongst his congregation. The arms of the saved souls in Bristol's bas-relief are not physically grasped by Christ that they might be borne away, which is the more usual typology of the subject, but our First Parents appear to reach up to clasp the foot of the crossed baton which Christ holds in his left hand, while he stretches out his right hand in the classical Roman gesture of someone in the act of speech, with forefinger and middle finger conjoined and extended. This ancient gesture, in the course of time, became accepted by the Church as uniquely that of conferring a blessing whereas, in its earliest iconographical manifestations, it indicated simply vocal communication, as in the 5th-century mosaic in S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, depicting Abraham's gesture as he enjoins Sarah to bake cakes for their angelic guests.⁷

In the Bristol 'Harrowing', therefore, Christ is uttering not a conventional blessing but preaching words of Salvation. The pseudo-gospel of Nicodemus, much quoted in the context of our bas-relief by such as Smith (1976), Zarnecki (1984) and Oakes (2000), certainly treats Christ's Harrowing of Hell extensively and it was notably exploited in 12th-century sculpture and in the later Middle English literature of the 13th century;⁸ but it is surely the plain text of the First Epistle General of Peter in the Bible (chapter 3, vv. 18–19; chapter 4, v. 6) which uniquely inspires Bristol's 11th-century representation of the Redeemer as Preacher:

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also *He went and preached unto the spirits in prison* (i.e. Hell)...For this cause was *the gospel preached* also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh....

This preaching role of the Saviour is not developed at all in the pseudo-Gospel of Nicodemus nor in the Middle English *Harrowing of Hell* which derives from it. Here other themes predominate and notably include the break-down of the harmony between Satan and Hell (the former represented as himself, the latter personified as a jailer) in a petulant exchange, Christ's violently bursting asunder the doors of Satan's penitentiary and his forcibly plundering ('harrowing') it of some of its choicest prisoners and, above all, the joyful reception of the Saviour by the souls

7. For other instances see D.A. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1986), 152.

8. W.M. Hulme, *The Middle English Harrowing of Hell and the Gospel of Nicodemus* (London, 1907).



Fig. 4. 'Christ's Harrowing of Hell': detached capital of the main apse arch, Hereford cathedral, c.1150.



Fig. 5. 'Christ's Harrowing of Hell': font of c.1150, St Mary Magdalene's church, Eardisley, Herefordshire.

of the righteous. Oakes usefully recalls, however, two iconographical traditions in the depiction of the Harrowing of Hell.⁹ The first, Roman or western, depicts Christ turning his face towards the righteous born before his incarnation, as he draws Adam by his right hand from Hell, as represented in a capital in Hereford cathedral of c.1100–1110 (Fig. 4). The Byzantine or eastern tradition favours Christ's turning away from Adam and the righteous as he drags him out, as seen in the font at Eardisley in Herefordshire of c.1150 (Fig. 5).¹⁰ Both of these emphasise – like the pseudo-gospel of Nicodemus – the irresistible force of divine justice. But there is another hermeneutic possibility, one that the Bristol 'Harrowing' arguably exploits, in which Christ is to be seen as *persuading* the righteous heathen to ascend and depart from Hell, not physically by grasping their arms but intellectually by rational speech: in other words, it is St Peter's vision of Christ as Preacher. Its execution as a work of art apart, the Bristol version of the 'Harrowing of Hell' – or 'Christ preaching in Limbo' as it might more accurately be called – is important and impressive because its theological sense is sounder.

The theological point at issue is that the souls of the righteous born before Christ, whom he released during his descent to Hell – Adam and Eve, the Old Testament Patriarchs and Prophets – were not dead as we normally understand that term. The righteous souls mentioned resided in what medieval scholasticism later named 'the Limbo of the Fathers', a region on the margins of Hell. Theological debate on punishments and rewards in the Afterlife had early seen the need of such a region as a result of the too-rigorous thought of St Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AD) on the related, more difficult matter of the justice to be meted out to unbaptised children, for whom the 'Limbo of the Children' was finally devised. The associated doctrine of Christ's descent to

9. C. Oakes, 'Romanesque architecture and sculpture [of Bristol Cathedral]', in J. Rogan (ed.), *Bristol Cathedral: History and Architecture* (Stroud, 2000), 67.

10. N. Pevsner, *Herefordshire* (The Buildings of England: Harmondsworth, 1963), s.v. 'Eardisley'.

Hell, undertaken in order to rescue any righteous souls from it, had emerged as early as *c.* 400 AD, and had then found its way into the Church's great Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds. As part of the theology of the Resurrection (*anastasis*), serious debate arose again on the whole matter in the 11th century, initiated by the Italian Lanfranc of Pavia (1005–89), archbishop of Canterbury. However, deliberation on the matter was perfected and elaborated by his more brilliant Italian pupil Anselm (1033–1109), his successor in the primatial See. This was at the time that Bristol's 'Harrowing of Hell' was conceived, a sculpture which – if inspired, as it seems to be, by the theological climate of the day – the present author, on these grounds, dates to the middle or second half of the century, rather than to its first half. Bristol's bas-relief therefore may best be understood as a product of the intellectual fervour of that period – which carried through into the century following, to be reflected, in their contrasting ways, in the iconography of the Hereford and Eardisley pieces.

The 11th century witnessed new beginnings of thought on the old issues of Christ's descent into Hell and the condign punishments to be allotted both to righteous souls born before the Christian era and also to unbaptised children. Thought on these knotty theological problems was finally brought to philosophical perfection by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, but only after two centuries of intellectual gestation.¹¹ The punishment imagined for the souls in Limbo was not endless torment ('pain of sense') but a feeling of deprivation ('pain of loss'). A century or so later, Dante in the *Divine Comedy* (completed by 1321), influenced by scholasticism, imagines them uttering sighs as an outward sign of their inward intellectual suffering.¹² Their penance, not their punishment (they did not appreciate that their discomfort was a temporary state), was to be aware of their loss of the Beatific Vision, the sight of God in Paradise, the true home of the soul. Theologians early maintained that all the souls in the Afterlife, in their pre-Doomsday state, whether in Hell, Purgatory or Heaven, must have not only an incorporeal body ('shade') in order to feel appropriate pain or joy, but must also retain their memory, will and intellect intact in order to cogitate and meditate on their eternal deserts. The survival of the will after death is important, as Anselm, who treated the nature of the human will extensively in three of his works, clearly saw. The sinners in Hell, for example, since they are what they were when they were alive, do not repent of their misdeeds; they still exercise their will, as Anselm said, 'in a disordered fashion' (*disordinate*) and therefore are still bent on injustice (and in Hell their crime becomes their punishment which they perversely desire). But Anselm also saw that there are 'multiple affections or aptitudes' of the will, including what Aquinas later specified as 'absolute will' and 'relative will'. Anselm's 'will to benefit' (*voluntas beatitudinis*) became Aquinas's 'absolute will', which in righteous souls inclines them to be with God in Paradise; but their 'will to justice', an aspect of Aquinas's 'relative will', keeps them willingly where God has put them; they humbly accept the fact that they were put into Hell by the will of a righteous God which cannot be faulted. The righteous souls on the edge of Hell know what they have lost, but accept their fate because God has willed it so. On the other hand, if they had room to exercise their will in an absolute sense, they would leave Limbo and would automatically rise to Heaven. In other words, it is their relative will, a function also of the intellect, that needs to be re-educated in order to correspond with what their absolute will desires. Hence the need of Christ's descent to Hell, in order to save them by talking to them: that is, as St Peter put it in his epistle, preaching the message of the Gospel – the Word of Life – to them. The righteous pagans in Limbo, at Christ's appearance in Hell following his death, only needed to say 'yes' to the divine Preacher – a 'yes' which is intellectual assent, based on the rational

11. C. Beiting, 'The Idea of Limbo in Thomas Aquinas', *The Thomist* 62 (1998), 217–24.

12. D.H. Higgins (ed.), *Dante: The Divine Comedy* (The World's Classics: Oxford, 1993), 508–12: *Inferno IV*.

understanding of the truths that the Preacher was speaking and which he embodied – and with that ‘yes’ they are released to eternal life.

Form and Function

A more suitable and succinct illustration of the whole theological point of Christ’s descent into Hell in order to preach the redemptive Word of Life could hardly be imagined than that provided by Bristol’s ‘Harrowing of Hell’ relief. Relatively misleading by contrast are the versions, whether Western or Byzantine, which depict Christ grasping Adam’s ‘right arm’ (as pseudo-Nicodemus puts it) and dragging him willy-nilly out of grief. The subject of the Harrowing of Hell as treated in Bristol’s relief-sculpture is therefore supremely appropriate as a ‘sermon in stone’ for the decoration of the monuments on College Green dedicated to the memory of Bristol’s earliest and possibly greatest preacher, St Jordan. What can be suggested at this stage in the argument concerning Bristol’s bas-relief, which is better understood as Christ Preaching in Limbo, is that the general condition of the approximately one thousand year old limestone carving – although not up to the standard of the newly discovered ‘Lichfield angel’ (see below) – is extraordinarily good, indicating almost certainly that it was displayed either indoors or, if outdoors, beneath cover.

As has been shown, the physical features of the relief of the ‘Harrowing of Hell’, or more succinctly ‘Christ Preaching in Limbo’, are awkward (size, trapezoidal shape or taper, heavy framing, an unworked reverse side); they do not lend themselves easily to resolve the problem of where and how the relief was put to use in the architectural complex on College Green. It is necessary, first of all, to determine what the chapel of St Jordan could have resembled.

The when and the what of St Jordan’s chapel now cannot be known beyond a doubt, given the deplorable fact of the destruction of its archaeological site during the building of the Council House and the landscaping of College Green in the 1950s. But there is a reasonable case to be made that St Jordan’s chapel might have housed his remains in a relic chamber or *hypogeum* not unlike that considered to have housed the relics of King Edward the Martyr (c.962–979) in the crypt of the south *porticus* at Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire. Indeed, similar Anglo-Saxon relic-chambers are to be found also at Deerhurst in our county as well as at Hexham in Northumbria.¹³ Where the stone relief of the ‘Christ Preaching in Limbo’ may have been situated is a matter of conjecture. Its impressive height of 170 cm (67 in.), its particular taper, its extraordinary perspective determined by Christ’s imposing figure and his downward gaze point to the likelihood that it must have been displayed in an upright rather than horizontal position. Yet its trapezoidal shape, as has been said, precludes its having been conceived as a wall panel in the setting of a frieze at the entrance to the *confessio* of St Jordan’s relic chamber, as in the classic case of the 4th-century panel of St Agnes, located above the steps leading down to her tomb in her eponymous catacomb outside Rome.

What has so far escaped observation and comment by scholars as a feature of the Bristol bas-relief are the socket-holes along each of its sides (see Figs. 6 and 12). These are the regular locating devices of early masonry, employing iron pins, as for example those in the residual stonework of Tintern abbey’s *pulpitum* (Fig. 7).¹⁴ In other words, Bristol’s Anglo-Saxon bas-relief was originally neither set into a wall or frieze (where such drill-holes would have been superfluous) nor exhibited

13. A. Thacker, ‘The Making of a Local Saint’, in A. Thacker and R. Sharpe (eds.), *Local Saints and Local Churches in the Early Medieval West* (Oxford, 2002), 45–73; C.A. Ralegh Radford, ‘Pre-Conquest Minster Churches’, *Archaeol. Jnl.* **130** (1973), 120–40.

14. S.A. Harrison, R.K. Morris and D.M. Robinson, ‘A fourteenth century *pulpitum* screen at Tintern Abbey, Monmouthshire [Gwent]’, *Antiq. Jnl.* **78** (1998), 177–268.



Fig. 6. 'Christ Preaching in Limbo' otherwise 'The Harrowing of Hell', Bristol cathedral, c.1050–1100, indicating lateral and frontal structural socket-holes.

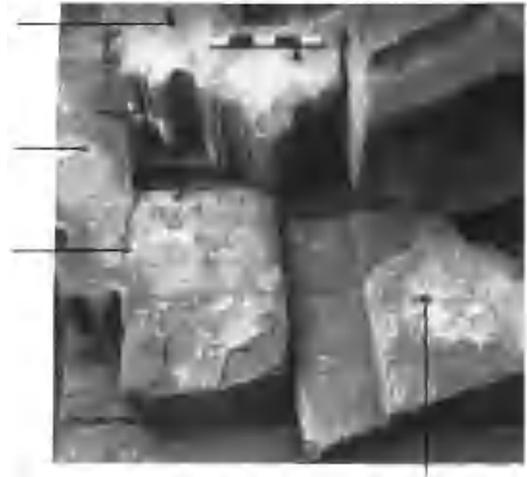


Fig. 7. Masons' locating socket-holes and iron pins in fragments of the 14th-century *pulpitum* screen of Tintern abbey, Gwent.

in isolation – but exploited in a vertical position as part of a monumental or architectural *ensemble*. Here two possible solutions suggest themselves.

Structural Considerations: the Pulpit

Having regard to the subject of the bas-relief's iconography which emphasises Christ's role as preacher, the bas-relief may have formed the engaged pedestal of a pulpit, either internal or open-air, set into the chapel's structure. It has already been proposed that the pulpit on College Green, first recorded in 1486 and witnessed by Camden in the 16th century and also called 'the great crosse' in a legal deposition of the late 15th century, was very probably a preaching pulpit with cross of the sort common to Dominican architecture – for example that at Black Friars in Hereford or its typological relative, the Poyntz Memorial cross, in the churchyard at Iron Acton, Gloucestershire. But the Bristol preaching pulpit could have been set up no earlier than 1221 when the Black Friars (the 'fratres praedicanter' of the deposition) made their first appearance in the town. What, if anything, had preceded it? Pre-Conquest church furniture in England has been entirely swept away – pulpits, lecterns, screens and shrines – but open-air pulpits are not uncommon in Italy. In papal Viterbo, for example, the simple uncovered outside pulpit at the Romanesque church of S. Maria Nuova, from which Thomas Aquinas preached in the mid 13th century, is still preserved. One of the earliest pictorial references to a covered outside pulpit of this sort is that by Giotto in the fresco of the Massacre of the Innocents of c.1306, in the Arena



Fig. 8. Giotto's painting of the Massacre of the Innocents *c.*1306: Arena Chapel of Padua.

Chapel at Padua (Fig. 8). Giotto was working on the very edge of the age of the Gothic in Italy, therefore his city-scapes are mostly Romanesque – and naturally so when he is seeking to capture, but not with any highly developed historical sense, a bygone age such as that in which the massacre in question occurred. His grip is on the city-scapes of an earlier Italy. Bristol's bas-relief of Christ preaching in Limbo might conceivably have provided support and ornament beneath the open-air pulpit in Giotto's tragic scene.

But systematic research on the Romanesque pulpit as church architectural furniture has yet to be attempted. In England only one external wall-pulpit of genuine age appears to survive – that of the 15th century in the St John's quadrangle of Magdalen College, Oxford. In the proper context

of Anglo-Saxon architecture, however, the architectural elevations by Irvine and Taylor of the chapel of St Laurence at Bradford-on-Avon – which might have been the pattern of St Jordan’s chapel on College Green – reveal no obvious doorway at a height that might indicate an earlier external pulpit.¹⁵ Evidence is equally scarce on the external walls of the more complete Anglo-Saxon churches of England as a whole.¹⁶ Only the raised doorway in the tower of St Mary’s church at Deerhurst presents such a possibility. Otherwise such pulpits do not seem to have existed in England in the late Anglo-Saxon period, or else the evidence has quite disappeared or been passed over in ignorance. Alternatively, an internal wall-mounted pulpit might be suggested, although once more analogues from Anglo-Saxon England are absent. Amongst the earliest and finest that survive are the examples at Chipping Sodbury and Wells cathedral, of the late 15th and early 16th century respectively.

Structural Considerations: the Shrine

The second of the possibilities for the employment of Bristol’s Anglo-Saxon bas-relief is as a feature – probably the principal feature – of a monument constructed for the remains of St Jordan, which a hymn in a 15th-century Book of Hours, commissioned by a Bristolian, suggests was located in the ‘Chapel on the Green’:

Ad honorem dei et sancti Jordani
 O felix christi confessor concivis caeli Jordane
 Sis pro fide intercessor nostre gentis anglicane
 Quam in fide perfecisti Augustino baptizante
 Cui consors extitisti ipso anglis predicante.
 Huius loci sis patronus in quo iaces *tumulatus*...

[Hymn ‘To the honour of God and of St Jordan’: O Jordan, blessed confessor of Christ and citizen of Heaven, intercede for us by virtue of the faith we of the English church profess, whom Augustine [first] baptised and you perfected in that holy faith, whose colleague you were in his preaching to the English. Be our patron [saint] in this place where you lie *entombed*....].¹⁷

Here *tumulatus* implies, etymologically, burial in a *raised* structure, which, if appropriate to its period, was most probably a suitably elaborate shrine. As early as the 6th century, Gregory of Tours, in his *Liber in Gloria Martyrum*, used the term *tumulum* (root of the past-participle *tumulatus*) in order to indicate what is clearly St Denis’s gabled shrine or feretory in Paris:

Alius autem super sepulchrum sanctum calcare non metuens....elapsis pedibus ab utroque parte, *quia turritum erat tumulum*, compressis testibus....examinis est inventus.

15. H.M. Taylor, ‘J.T. Irvine’s work at Bradford-on-Avon’, *Archaeol. Jnl.* **129** (1972), 89–118.
16. A.W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest* (Oxford, 1930); K.J. Conant, *Carolingian and Romanesque Architecture 800–1200* (Pelican History of Art: Harmondsworth, 1959); E.A. Fisher, *The Greater Anglo-Saxon Churches* (London, 1962); H.M. Taylor and J. Taylor, *Anglo-Saxon Architecture* (Cambridge, 1965).
17. M.R. James, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1895), 62–5. The hymn to St Jordan is followed by a collect which makes specific reference to his tomb or shrine within the chapel: ‘omnes qui in hac oratorio *sepulchrum sancti Jordani* confessoris tui devote visitaverunt’: ‘all who have devotedly visited the tomb of Thy confessor Jordan within this oratory chapel’.

[One other (of the thieves), who did not fear trampling on the holy tomb.... lost his footing, with his feet slipping either side of it, because the shrine (tumulum) was turret-like....and he was found dead with crushed parts].¹⁸

As has been said, all the shrines of England's pre-Conquest past have been dismantled and dispersed or destroyed. Even surviving parts are rare and often of dubious provenance. In the wider Bristol region perhaps three such fragments, of pointed triangular interlace, survive embedded in the altar frontal in the chancel of St Laurence's chapel at Bradford-on-Avon.¹⁹ Warwick Rodwell has recently discovered at Lichfield cathedral the left half of a stone end-panel of very probably the feretory-chest of St Chad. Carved with a representation of the Angel Gabriel in an Annunciation scene, the piece is 60 cm in height and of late 8th-century date.²⁰ Two observations must be made at this stage which relate to the hypothesis that Bristol's 'Harrowing of Hell' formed the end-panel of St Jordan's shrine: first, that Irish influence has been adduced for the Bradford-on-Avon fragments quoted above – a dimension that will be argued here in relation to the stemmatics of the Bristol bas-relief – and in a chapel of probable affinity with that of St Jordan.²¹ Secondly, what appears to indicate a coped stone feretory at Lichfield, created two centuries before the Bristol bas-relief, is arguably part of an evolutionary pattern of shrine typology which already embraced historiated or 'narrative' end-panels.

An up-to-date monograph on shrine typology awaits publication, although the contributions by Lasko and Crook are useful, while that of Ralegh Radford is important for its investigation of the relationship between the early portable reliquary casket and the immovable or monumental feretory shrine, something that Butler and Graham-Campbell also touch on briefly but which the monographic work of Nilson does not explore.²² What is clear is that the earliest shrines recorded in literature, where the sarcophagus was disinterred and 'elevated' to lie alongside the altar, belong to the 6th century: St Denis's shrine in Merovingian Paris, recorded by Gregory of Tours in 574 AD, already mentioned, is a case in point. At the other end of the evolutionary process, the developed Romanesque 'high shrine' of St Cuthbert in Durham cathedral, erected in 1104, saw the sarcophagus raised above head-height in order to accommodate, beneath, seating for pilgrims. The raised feretories of such shrines were supported in many instances by multiple columns, but the base of St Cuthbert's appears from the evidence of *The Rites of Durham* (1593) to have anticipated the side-walls of St Alban's earliest recorded shrine, which supported aumbries of wainscot, statuary and alabaster 'pictures'. Importantly, the base also contained seating for the comfort of pilgrims desirous of closer and more efficacious proximity to the miracle-working saint (see Fig. 9):

18. B. Krusch (ed.), *Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum: Gregorii Episcopi Turonensis Historiarum*, Lib. X (Hannover, 1937), i.536.
19. R. Cramp, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture VII: South-West England* (Oxford, 2006), s.vv. 'Bristol', 'Bradford-on-Avon'.
20. W. Rodwell, 'The Lichfield Angel', *Current Archaeol.* **205** (2006), 8–17.
21. L. Stone, 'Anglo-Saxon Art', in R.B. Pugh and E. Crittall (eds.), *Victoria History of the County of Wiltshire II* (London, 1955), 35–41, quoted in R. Cramp (see note 19 above), 205.
22. P.E. Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800–1200* (New Haven and London, 1972), 4–8; J. Crook, 'The typology of early medieval shrines: A previously misidentified "tomb-shrine" panel from Winchester Cathedral', *Antiq. Jnl.* **70** (1990), 49–64; C.A. Ralegh Radford, 'Two Scottish Shrines: Jedburgh and St Andrews', *Archaeol. Jnl.* **112** (1955), 43–60; L. Butler and J. Graham-Campbell, 'A Lost Reliquary Casket from Gwythern, North Wales', *Archaeol. Jnl.* **70** (1990), 40–9; B. Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1998).

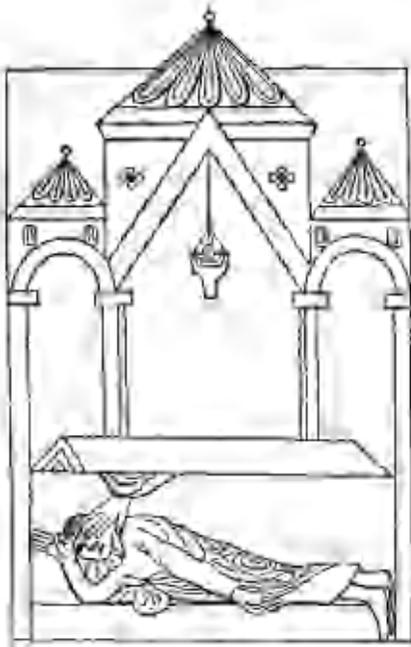


Fig. 9. Baduthegn healed of the palsy at St Cuthbert's shrine (1104) in Durham cathedral: Lawson MS in J.T. Fowler (ed.), *The Rites of Durham* (Surtees Society 107, 1903).



Fig. 10. Base, feretory and feretory cover of the shrine of St Alban (1305–8), St Albans cathedral. Height of base 244 cm; length 257 cm.

In St Cuthberts feretorye

The goodly monument of St Cuthbert adioyninge to the quire...was exalted with most curious workmanship of fine and costly marble all limned and gilded with gold *hauinge foure seates or places conuenient under the shrine for the pilgrims or laymen* [lame men ?] *sittinge on their knees to leane and rest on*, in time of their deuout offerings and feruent prayers to God and holy St Cuthbert, for his miraculous reliefe and succour....At the west end of this shrine of St Cuthbert was *a little altar adioyned to it* for masse to bee sd. on onely upon the great and holy feast of St Cuthberts day in lent.²³

The typology of the St Cuthbert shrine, with seating beneath a raised feretory and an altar located at the west end, still survives in the mid 13th-century shrine of St Edward the Confessor in Westminster abbey, which was re-elaborated above the lowest tier by Italian craftsmen – with Italianate taste – in the reign of Queen Mary Tudor, largely employing the carefully stored parts of the original. The Cuthbertian solution for the amenity of pilgrims, with a floor-level chamber, is more apparent than real in the present early 14th-century shrine (restored) of St Alban in St Albans cathedral (see Fig. 10), with its raised feretory, because here a solid plinth occupies most of its base's interior space, the pilgrims being limited to touching its stonework from the outside,

23. J.T. Fowler (ed.), *The Rites of Durham* (Surtees Society 107, 1903), 3–4.

through the lateral arcades. But its form over-all clearly relates to the tradition of such chambered high shrines.

The hypothesised shrine of St Jordan must therefore be placed between the typological poles of the 6th century (St Denis) and the early 12th (St Cuthbert). Into this linear simplicity, however, must be inserted another, complicating coordinate: that of the known relationship of the portable casket shrine or reliquary to its monumental counterpart – and it is here that Irish influence in the typology of the structures, already referred to in the case of Bradford-on-Avon, may perhaps have played its part. Such caskets broadly fall into two categories: the burse reliquary and the house-shrine.²⁴ The former, as its name indicates, was purse-shaped with a triangular cross-section, such as St Manchan's yew-wood reliquary (base 23 cm, sides 51 × 35.5 cm) in Boher church at Lemanaghan (Co. Offaly) of the early 12th century.²⁵ This appears to have related directly to the full-sized, historiated *piramides* reported in William of Malmesbury's early history of Glastonbury of c.1130.²⁶ The more common portable house-shrine was based on the earliest classical form of full-sized feretory or sarcophagus, aptly denominated by early medieval witnesses as a *domunculus* – or *domuncula* as in Bede – i.e. 'little house' – or even *tugurium* 'hut', which in the case of St Chad's shrine alluded to by Bede was made of wood rather than stone.²⁷ The portable form, suitable for displaying on an altar, is well represented in Anglo-Saxon art by the hip-roofed Uttoxeter casket in box-wood (height 8.3 × length 15.2 × width 5 cm) of c.1050, in Cleveland Museum. The full-sized forms are seen in the gable-ended grave-cover of the 9th-century Hedda (or Monks') stone at Peterborough (height 90 × length 135 × width 45 cm), in the late 9th- to 10th-century hipped-roof example of the reconstructed shrine at St Andrews in Scotland (height 142 × length 173 × width 91 cm), and in the early 14th-century raised feretory-chest of St Alban (height 87 × length 215 × width 90 cm).²⁸

The Irish or 'Insular' Connection

The Irish capacity for decorative craftsmanship soon made itself conspicuous in the field of the portable reliquary. The stylistic trajectory of such Insular art spanned the centuries, to produce the bell-shrine of St Patrick in the late 11th century (Figs. 15 and 17) and the exquisite bell-shrine of St Conall in the 15th century (Fig. 14). What connects these two artefacts in their significant form is the trapezoidal cross-section of the box or base. This feature may well derive, conservatively and pietistically, from the inward-leaning doorways, with massive lintels, of the stone-built monks' cells of 6th-century Ireland, for example the oratory of Gallerus in the Dingle Peninsula. This primitive feature is seen again in the 9th- or 10th-century doorway of Clonamery church (Co. Kilkenny), and also in that part of western England with access by river to the Irish sea – as witnessed in the blocked south cloister doorway at St Mary's church, Deerhurst, in Gloucestershire. This atavistic, aesthetic penchant for the inward-leaning remained long in the vocabulary of Irish architecture; it is reflected also in the Irish Romanesque of the early 12th-century loft in Cormac's chapel in Cashel (Co. Tipperary) (Fig. 13), and most memorably in the strikingly idiosyncratic

24. Lasko, *Ars Sacra 800–1200*, 4–8.

25. F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Romanesque Period 1020–1170* (London, 1970), 74–81.

26. J. Scott (ed.), *The Early History of Glastonbury [by William of Malmesbury]* (Woodbridge, 1981), 68–9, 84–5.

27. The Ven. Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. B. Colgrave and ed. J. McClure (Oxford, 1994), IV.3.

28. Raleigh Radford, 'Two Scottish shrines', 43–60.

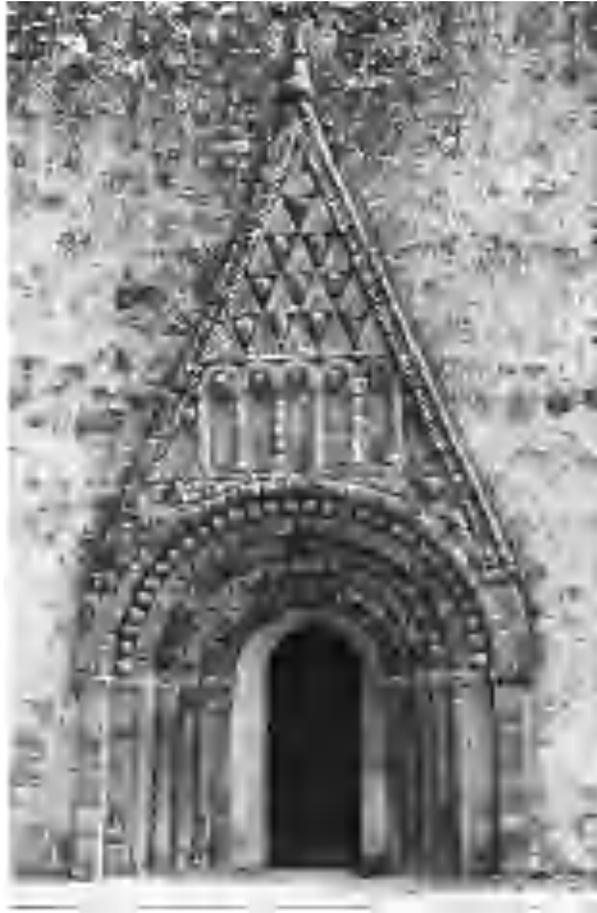


Fig. 11. Romanesque portal of Clonfert cathedral (Co. Galway), c.1180.

batter of the jambs in the otherwise regular portal of c.1180 of Clonfert cathedral (Co. Galway) (Fig. 11), a feature which has been called ‘uniquely Irish’ and which ‘deprives [the portal] of any sense of the classical stateliness possessed by great Romanesque doorways elsewhere’.²⁹

It is probably this feature of Irish art that is also to be found in the distinctive inward-leaning sides of the Bristol carving of ‘Christ Preaching in Limbo’. Bristol was a town long associated with Ireland through trade, politics and land-holding. Early trade included slave-dealing with Ireland, which St Wulfstan, in whose Worcester diocese Bristol stood, halted in the 11th century. The shipping of supplies for the Irish expeditions of Henry II, who granted Dublin to Bristol as a dependency in the 12th century, were an important feature of the town’s commercial life. Already, by the 1160s, a quarter in Bristol known as ‘Irish Mead’ existed, which also argues for a conspicuous

29. Henry, *Irish Art in the Romanesque Period*, 170–1; T. O’Keeffe, ‘The Romanesque portal at Clonfert Cathedral’, in C. Bourke (ed.), *From the Isles of the North: Early Medieval Art in Ireland and Britain* (Belfast, 1995), 265.

and receptive Irish immigrant population in medieval Bristol.³⁰ Business links from the 1170s included regular visits by the abbot of St Augustine's abbey to its endowed lands, mainly those in Co. Kilkenny (Clonamery) and Co. Galway (Clonfort).³¹ St Brandon (or Brendon) 'the Navigator' was abbot of Clonfert in the 6th century, to whom the chapel, now demolished, on the hill overlooking College Green was dedicated and whose cult was vigorous from the 9th century onwards. Leland in his *Itinerary* (1534–43) witnessed its fabric as 'now defaced' but as interesting would have been information on the date of its earliest foundation.³² Importantly, the abbey's endowed Irish lands (*rectoriae* or fiefs) were those donated by Bristol's Hardings who, of all the town's merchant families, were best placed to commission the bas-relief of 'Christ preaching in Limbo' (see below). Bearing in mind the stylistic relationships and reciprocal influences in the evolution of portable and monumental reliquaries, the trapezoidal stone may plausibly have been employed as the end-panel of St Jordan's shrine, constructed in the style of the typical Irish bell-shrine, providing the monumental *ensemble* which the bas-relief's masonic locating sockets, already referred to, strongly suggest as their purpose (Fig. 18). Such a distinctively decorated end-panel, engraved in this instance with the Crucifixion, is also to be found in the hip-roofed Saint's Tomb of oblong *bombé* base, found at Gosforth near Seascale in Cumbria, which also faced the Irish Sea and is datable to the 10th or early 11th century (Fig. 16).³³

The socket-holes on the front of the Bristol bas-relief also demand explanation. That at top right, near Christ's outstretched hand, argues for the location of a taper-holder: the four socket-holes in Peterborough's Hedda stone are known to have borne such essential ritual items. Tapers thus inserted in the Bristol bas-relief, in the half-light of a mausoleum chapel, would have dramatically lit up the face of the Saviour, whose *descensus ad inferos* was considered by theologians to have been precisely an 'Illumination of Hell'. The frontal socket-holes at the base, to left and right on a horizontal plane, may each have supported a collection box or pyx, of the sort mentioned in the accounts of St Augustine's abbey of 1491–2.³⁴ More feasibly, they may have secured an altar-table, such as that at the western end of the base of the high shrine of St Cuthbert (as mentioned in the *Rites of Durham*) or that of St Edward the Confessor's shrine in Westminster abbey, which survives in its reconstructed form. How the feretory of St Jordan was integrated into the shrine is also a matter of conjecture. The impressive size of the putative end-panel with its carving of Christ preaching in Limbo (height 170 cm or 67 in.) may well indicate that the structure's base resembled that of St Cuthbert's 'high shrine' containing seats 'for pilgrims and laymen', where the house-shaped feretory was raised over the shrine's base (see Fig. 9).³⁵ This arrangement continued also in the Confessor's originally 13th-century shrine (height 274 cm or 108 in.; height:length ratio 1.0:1.3) and in St Alban's early 14th-century monument (height 244 cm or 96 in.; height:length ratio 1.0:1.1).

30. J.W. Sherborne, *The Port of Bristol in the Middle Ages* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association Pamphlet 13, 1965), 2–4; M. Dresser and P. Fleming, *Bristol: ethnic minorities and the city 1000–2000* (Chichester, 2007), 19.

31. J. Bettey, 'St Augustine's Abbey 1140–1539', in Rogan (ed.), *Bristol Cathedral: History and Architecture*, 4; D. Walker (ed.), *The Cartulary of St Augustine's Abbey, Bristol* (Gloucestershire Record Series 10, BGAS, 1998), p. xxiv.

32. John Leland, *The Itinerary*, ed. T. Hearne (London, 1744–1745), X.8.

33. R.N. Bailey and R. Cramp, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture II: Cumberland, Westmorland and Lancashire North-of-the-Sands* (Oxford, 1988), s.v. 'Gosforth'.

34. G. Beachcroft and A. Sabin, *Two Computus Rolls of St Augustine's Abbey, Bristol* (Bristol Record Society 9, 1938), 232.

35. Illumination in Fowler (ed.), *The Rites of Durham*, 1.



Fig. 12. The Bristol bas-relief, c.1050–1100. Height 170 cm; width 66–77 cm.



Fig. 13. Loft in Cormac's chapel, Cashel (Co. Tipperary), 1134.



Fig. 14. Bell shrine of St Conall, 15th century. Height 21.6 cm.



Fig. 15. Base of bell-shrine of St Patrick, late 11th century. Height 16.5 cm.



Fig. 16. The 'Saint's Tomb', Gosforth, Cumbria, 10th or 11th century. Height 80 cm; length 157 cm.



Fig. 17. St Patrick's bell-shrine, late 11th century. Overall height 21.4 cm.

The stone end-panel of what appears to have been the post-Bedeian shrine of St Chad, recently discovered by Warwick Rodwell, indicates that it was part of a low gable-ended feretory-chest that may have lain upon a base developed like the later 'high shrines' at Durham, St Albans and Westminster. The bases of the latter pair, which survive in reconstructed form (Westminster's more reliably), are elaborated with side-arcades of three and four bays respectively, and it is worth considering whether the base of St Jordan's shrine, if realised in the manner tentatively proposed in this paper, may not have contained a similar number of bays in stone or oak – the whole in a style not unlike, perhaps, that of the Romanesque shrine-type base of the censer-cover from Pershore. This, datable to the late 10th or early 11th century, would have been routinely employed in the elaborate rituals of censuring the reliquary caskets and shrines of saints in a chapel or abbey of the period (see Fig. 19).³⁶

36. E. Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), 106 and fig. 100.



Fig. 18. Author's reconstruction of the hypothesised high shrine of St Jordan incorporating the bas-relief 'Christ Preaching in Limbo' as its west end panel and the taper holder as suggested by the upper frontal socket-hole of the carving. The lateral socket-hole, holding the iron pins normally employed to stabilise the component parts, are also displayed.



Fig. 19. The Pershore censer-cover with shrine-type base, 10th–11th century. 3.5 × 6.0 × 5.4 cm.

Conclusion

Whatever the exact location of Bristol's bas-relief before the 18th century, when the Great Storm of 1703 probably destroyed the fabric of St Jordan's chapel and set its decorative furniture free, this expensive masterpiece of stone carving must surely have belonged, at one time, not to some quiet corner of a sacred building but to an architectural setting associated with the dynamic confession and preaching of the Word. The one place that provided this milieu before the Hardings' foundation of the church and abbey of St Augustine was most plausibly the chapel on College Green, arguably an Anglo-Saxon *martyrium* containing the remains of St Jordan, raised on a sacred spot where it was popularly believed that St Augustine of Canterbury had held his conference in 603 AD with the leaders of the residual British Church of our island's still unconquered west and where St Jordan himself was reputed to have launched his long preaching mission in our region. Here, in a sculptural tribute to an extraordinary preacher, Bristol's bas-relief can perhaps be understood as forming part of his new or renovated shrine, its commissioning an act of grateful commemoration on behalf of the town's entire Christian population. Conjecturally, if the bas-relief was indeed datable to the second half of the 11th century as its theme suggests, the donor may well have been either Bristol's leading citizen Eadnoth the Staller, the popularly reputed 'King of Denmark' and merchant of the Ostman ports of Ireland (c.1030–68), or else his son Harding, 'Harding the Dane', reeve of Bristol

(c.1060–1115).³⁷ Both had been favoured by the Conqueror for their political support and rewarded with the sort of wealth that could permit conspicuous gifts to the Church. Within a half century or so, Robert FitzHarding would take their family to the zenith of its social trajectory as citizens of the town and port of Bristol, to become the builder of St Augustine's abbey on the green.

But certain nice congruences of religious events, before that time, can be discerned that are perhaps not coincidental and that can be seen as relevant to determining the historical context of the appearance, in the second half of the 11th century, of the bas-relief 'Christ Preaching in Limbo'. Firstly, in 1091, had taken place the translation of the body of St Augustine to its new shrine in the rebuilt abbey church at Canterbury amidst national rejoicing, an event which would have been widely anticipated and of which the Hardings could not have been in ignorance.

Secondly, the Hardings' latest male offspring was baptized with the name of Augustine's preaching companion, Jordan, very probably in the same decade of the same century.³⁸ Whatever the precise dating of Jordan's baptism, this, following Augustine's translation, must have occurred within a short, critical time of the completion of the Millennium, a century of heightened religious consciousness and piety, both public and private, as theology, mindful of Christ as compassionate and eloquent *praedicator* against whom the Gates of Hell had not prevailed, was grappling also with the related mysteries and terrors of *Dies Irae*, *Dies Illa*, the day of His second descent as universal Judge. It is precisely this widespread curiosity and concern over the *minutiae* of eternal rewards and punishments in the Afterlife that the subject of Bristol's bas-relief 'Christ preaching in Limbo' reflects, with its theme of divine justice tempered by mercy.

Finally, the question also poses itself as to whether the sacrament of the baptism of Jordan FitzHarding might not have taken place within St Jordan's ancient chapel on or near the occasion of the rededication of the saint's refurbished shrine, perhaps, in the circumstances, the occasion even of St Jordan's solemn translation or elevation, replicating in humble tribute the greater event of the recent posthumous veneration of his master at Canterbury. The newly carved bas-relief may then plausibly be understood as having been provided by Bristol's leading merchants, the Hardings, during the last days of the Millennium in anticipation of its apocalyptic climax; by a family which was already, no doubt, contemplating the building of the church of St Augustine the Less on the green as the necessary precursor of a more splendid abbey in his name and which was concerned to propitiate and venerate a local saint who, notwithstanding Bede's silence, was held to have played a companionable role in the work of the national saint of the English and a crucial redemptive role as preacher in the early life of the Bristol region.

37. B. Wells-Furby (ed.), *A Catalogue of the Medieval Muniments at Berkeley Castle I* (Gloucestershire Record Series 17, BGAS, 2004), p. xxi; B.W. Greenfield, 'Meriet of Meriet and Hestercombe', *Proc. Somerset Archaeological and Natural Hist. Society* 28 (1882), 100–1.

38. D. Walker (ed.), *Cartulary of St Augustine's Abbey*, p. xix. The precise dates of Jordan FitzHarding and his place in the family remain a matter of speculation. David Walker preferred to regard him as Harding's fourth son 'born in the first decade of the twelfth century'. Bridget Wells-Furby presents him, without dates, as the family's third child (*Catalogue of Medieval Muniments at Berkeley Castle*, p. liii). David Walker arrived at his conclusions based on the likelihood that Robert FitzHarding, the second son who died c.1171, 'is not likely to have been born before 1100'. However, this is not necessarily the case. Robert, of wealthy stock and probably most frugal in his daily life of religious observation, may well have reached somewhere near his eightieth year at his death, allowing his brother Jordans's birth also before the century's turn. This article's understanding of the matter is also speculative, but it offers the Millennium as an extraordinary but very plausible religious context for the notable religious phenomena under investigation.