

LICHFIELD ANGEL.

The fragments of sculpture which form the left hand corner of a box-like structure with, on the carved face, the figure of an angel about 2ft, 61.5 cm high, are of outstanding importance in the history of European relief carving. The reasons for this are, in summary, because of the technical quality and assurance of the carving and its unweathered surface which enables one to see detail rarely surviving in works of this date and, above all, because of the unusual survival of the pigments which had enhanced it. In addition it is one of the rare examples in Anglo-Saxon carving of a stratified discovery in a controlled excavation. This demonstrated that it had been buried after a major episode of burning, and the deposition of a coin of King Edgar 957-75 which seems to predate the burial. This enables Rodwell to say 'This points to the likelihood that the sculpture was buried no later than the tenth century'. The archaeological context and the nature of the important pigments are considered in detail elsewhere.

The figure is shown in the act of alighting in a naturalistic pose, in which he is almost fully facing the spectator but with head slightly turned to his left. His right hand is held up in blessing and in his left he carries his floriated rod of authority as befits a messenger of God. He is haloed, showing that he is also a saint, and at his feet are plants symbolic of his heavenly origin since these are the flowers of paradise – often depicted in Early Christian art. His curly hair falls behind his ears and is bound by a file, and he is shown as a solid muscular figure with beardless face and strongly marked features in which the eyes, nostrils, and mouth, are deeply marked. He is wearing a pallium and tunica and the drapery is closely modelled to his limbs, with the folds strongly emphasised around the knees and calves, and both neckline and hem are distinctively finished with an edging and crumpled folds. His wings are prominently displayed and multicoloured.

I return to these attributes later, but first we may consider what angels meant to early Christians. The first Christians inherited a legacy of angels from Jewish theology, and from popular cults which had grown up particularly in relation to the archangel Michael who, in the early days of the church, was often seen to rival Christ¹. A persistent question was however, when were angels created? Genesis is silent about the creation of angels and in the early Christian centuries Neoplatonists and Gnostics could postulate angels as uncreated spirits even participating in creation. At the Council of Nicea however in AD325, the bishops declared God as 'creator of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible' and it was therefore assumed that angelic beings were created with light on the first day. Yet how far angels participated in matter and therefore could reasonably be depicted remained a difficult problem.

Despite genuine scruples about giving them bodies of human form, angels early appear in Christian art. They are depicted as young men, as indeed they are in biblical accounts, for example in their appearance after the Resurrection and at the Ascension. As messengers and intercessors between God and man they early appear flanking the Virgin who is the acme of mortal's intercession (Fig 1)..

By the 5th century angels were normally depicted with wings perhaps based on their roles as messengers and the attributes of other creatures such as winged genii or Nike. By the Anglo-Saxon period the presence of wings is often the only means of distinguishing angels from saints or evangelists. Angels figure prominently in early prayers and are shown assisting at the celebration of the Eucharist as at San Vitale Ravenna. They are grouped into hierarchies, most commonly with three triads, of which the lowest are powers, archangels and angels, and, from biblical sources, only the three archangels, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are named. Individual figures of angels could still in the east Christian world be depicted with the elegance of a Greek statue (fig. 2) at a time when in the west figural depiction had declined. But portable objects such as ivories, books and textiles circulated widely and were available as models, although such models were not always easy to copy for artists accustomed to two dimensional geometric art. Nevertheless such models can be postulated for the figures incised on the wooden coffin reliquary for St Cuthbert, dated c. 698AD. Here there are a litany of angels (one bearing a fleur de lys staff) as well as on the ends the two arch angels, Gabriel and Michael, and the Virgin and Child². Chad, who died 672, was initially buried near to St Mary's church but was later transferred to the new church of St Peter and buried in a wooden reliquary. This was before the 8th century and could have been about the same time as Cuthbert's wooden coffin was constructed. Was it also carved with angels and saints and the Virgin?. I return to that point later.

The Lichfield angel must be Gabriel alighting for the announcement of his message to Mary with his right hand held up in blessing. The significance of the Annunciation was well recognised in the Anglo-Saxon church and there was a widely held tradition which placed the date of Christ's conception and crucifixion on the same date 25th of March, a date which also coincides with the vernal equinox when light begins to increase in the world. Bede, in the 8th century, notes this and also says that the Annunciation was the fitting beginning of human redemption. In a homily on Advent he says 'And so the angel Gabriel was sent by God. Rarely do we read that angels appearing to human beings are designated by name but whenever this occurs it is so even by their very names that they may suggest what ministry they have come to carry out. Now Gabriel means strength of God, and rightly he shone forth with such a name since by his testimony he bore witness to the coming birth of God in flesh'³

Annunciation scenes seem to be particularly popular in the 8th century in England and the iconography varies according to the emphases placed on the different aspects of the event.⁴ On the Ruthwell Cross, of the early 8th century, the angel and Mary are both standing in humble reverent postures, the angel with hands held together. On the Hovingham panel, (Yorkshire) which is most probably one side of a sarcophagus, the two figures face each other with Mary seated, the angel standing with head humbly bent. These two Northumbrian depictions contrast with the more active pose of the angel in the 8th century Genoels – Elderen Diptych now in Brussels but of Northumbrian origin where the stance of the angel (see fig.3) is very like the Lichfield piece. Unfortunately we do not possess the figure of the Virgin which must have been to the angel's left on the Lichfield panel, but angels seem to be very popular in Mercia in the late 8th/early 9th century, both on crosses and in panels which must have decorated the walls of churches. A remarkable series of figures with classical treatment of the hair and drapery but in several different styles survive at Breedon, Castor, Fletton and Peterborough. It is difficult to compare some of the

details in the very worn figures with the pristine details of the Lichfield angel but the series include two angels which are relevant for the Lichfield piece. At Fletton (fig.4) the Gabriel figure has the same pose as the Lichfield angel although his tip toe stance shows a lack of the ability to replicate this stance as in late antique art, and, unlike the Lichfield Gabriel, he holds the rod in his right hand and left hand up in blessing. He has the same type of tightly curled hair and deeply drilled eyes, but the drapery folds – although they attempt to show the line of the legs through - are slack and meaningless. The almost life-size figure of the angel Gabriel at Breedon (fig 5) is however superficially so like the Lichfield angel that they could have been derived from the same model. There are however subtle differences which could indicate a difference of date or model. The Breedon angel is frontal facing, but both figures are standing with one foot forward and one sideways, both have the right hand held up in blessing and the floriated rod in the left but the Lichfield angel gives a Latin blessing and the Breedon a Greek – see for example the angel on a sixth century East Christian textile. The floriated rods are also different: the leaves on the Lichfield rod replicate the leaves of the frond which springs from near his feet, and indeed the leaf spacers at Castor are also of this type (see fig.6), unlike the stylised fleur de lys of the Breedon rod and the stiff pomegranate plants at the angel's feet. There are similarities in the hair dressing but the treatment of the features of the Lichfield angel is more like the other Mercian figures than this one from Breedon, which does not share the deeply incised eyes of all the other figures. The bold tubular folds of the drapery and the treatment of the hemlines on this Breedon angel are also very different from those at Lichfield, and, although none of the figures have the pallium draped in the classical manner, the large Breedon angel has the folds correctly falling only over the left arm whereas other figures from Breedon and Fletton (Figs 4 and 6) are like the Lichfield angel in that the pallium is draped scarf-like over both arms. It has been suggested by David Parsons, in a carefully argued note, that the large Breedon angel could be of a later date than the majority of the other figures, and reflecting the period of monastic revival and patronage in the tenth century⁵ and this interpretation remains a distinct possibility. Clearly however different figural styles could co-exist, as is evidenced in late antiquity and in the continental Carolingian renaissance as well as in the Mercian group itself, and we are dealing with only fragmentary evidence for the Anglo-Saxon period in which new discoveries often prompt re-evaluation.

These Mercian sculptures are remarkable for their evocation of classical antiquity and amongst them the Lichfield figure seems to show the greatest confidence and understanding of the genre. Mercian sculpture in the late 8th /early 9th century seems to have made independent use of the new models, in ivories, textiles or manuscripts similar to those which revitalised the art styles of Europe in the age of Charles the Great. The features which demonstrate how closely the Lichfield carver had absorbed his antique models are the naturalistic neck and hem lines, and the pose - which is very difficult to replicate. This seems to be why the more normal three quarter pose, is usually found in the 'active' Annunciation scenes. One may compare for example the Anglo-Saxon Genoels – Elderen ivory book cover mentioned above (Fig 3) and the ivory relief from a Carolingian Diptych from Cologne (Fig 7). It is unfortunate that figural sculpture in stone is so rare on the continent in the seventh to tenth centuries and comparisons with Anglo-Saxon sculpture have to be made with other media. Some continental ivories of the eighth – ninth centuries have prominent round eyes emphasised by insets of glass beads, and this is seen in the round in the famous head of a monk from the excavations at San Vincenzo al Volturno (see Fig.8). Such glass

insets are frequently found in sculpture and stucco in the East Christian world and are translated to the west in for example the seventh century decoration of the Poitiers mausoleum or friezes from Brescia in the eighth / ninth century. It is possible the same influences are reflected in some Anglo-Saxon stone sculptures and that the cowed figure from Breedon (fig 9) and the Lichfield angel had such eyes. The widespread fashion for deeply gouged eyes in Southumbrian sculptures has sometimes been considered a Mercian trait but it is found in the eighth /ninth century in sculptures from Gloucestershire to Yorkshire and may well reflect the influence of popular new models, most plausibly of ivories. Even in sculptures such as Newent in Gloucestershire which have departed a long way from classical models (Fig.10) such eyes are a prominent feature.

Much has been written about how Offa, 757-796, emulated Charlemagne and in some ways outflanked him, but, in establishing an archepiscopal see at Lichfield in his own kingdom, he must have acted like others before him and brought in works of art and craftsmen whose influence is reflected in this sculpture and others like it as in the group mentioned above where there is a strong East Christian influence. This carving fits well into that milieu, and despite the fact that there were later periods of revival in England the period of the late eighth /early ninth seems the most likely date for this piece. There is also, as I have remarked elsewhere a revival of the sarcophagus form in this period. The Lichfield piece has no base and it seems that one was never intended, was it therefore constructed to encase in a newly fashionable style St Chad's humble wooden *theca* (as Cuthbert's coffin was later encased). As such it would have done justice to the major liturgical focus which Warwick Rodwell has envisaged.

What its fate was after that is a matter for speculation. As time went by and the ninth century with its troubles and Viking wars gave place to the reforms and revivals of the church in Southumbria in the tenth century, large classical sculptures of angels remained in vogue, but many were no longer the solemn hieratic figure of the earlier stone icons, they tend to be involved busy creatures. The art of the late tenth /early eleventh century was as different from the late eighth as was the 17th from the 19th. If the shrine chest was damaged or desecrated in the period of the burning identified in Rodwell's excavation it could have been felt to be unsuitable for a rebuilt church, but it could also have appeared very old fashioned. So, like the early Norman fonts which were buried under church floors when the new fashions of 14th century prevailed is this a reason why our shrine covering was broken and buried, but kept within the church. How can we ever know? Like so many exciting archaeological discoveries it leaves us with many questions some of which may be answered by further study.

Rosemary Cramp (October 2006)

1. For a select bibliography of angels relevant to this theme see Rosemary Cramp *CASSS VII, South Western England* Oxford 2006; for the problems encountered particularly in Byzantium in depicting angels see, Glen Peers *Subtle Bodies*, Berkeley and London 2001.

2. For a detailed discussion of the iconography and style of this coffin see E. Kitzinger's analysis in The Relics of St Cuthbert, ed C. Battiscombe, Durham 1956, 228-304.
3. Bede the Venerable, Homilies on the Gospels 1, Translated L.T. Martin and D. Hurst, Kalamazoo 1991, 20.
4. See Jane Hawkes, 'Mary and the Cycle of Resurrection : the Iconography of the Hovingham Panel, in eds John Michael Spearman and John Higgitt, The Age of Migrating Ideas, National museums of Scotland 1993, 254-260. Mary Clayton, The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo- Saxon England, Cambridge 1990.
5. David Parsons, 'A Note on the Breedon Angel' Trans. Leics. Arch. and Hist. Society, 51, 1976-7, 40-43.

Additional References.

- G. Schiller, Iconography of Christian Art 1, London 1971.
- R. Cramp, 'Schools of Mercian Sculpture' in ed. Ann Dornier, Mercian Studies Leicester 1977, 191-233. Figs 208-217. Angels 56b and 58c.