Yorkshire Philosophical Society

1822

Annual Report for the year 2005

The Romanesque Doorway at Healaugh Church[1]

Rita Wood

General geographical and historical remarks

Healaugh church is one of the best possible introductions to Romanesque sculpture, and it is only eight miles from York. The doorway is well-preserved and even the corbels are easy to see, while inside is a chancel arch and north arcade also of the 12th century. There is a sculptural richness at this small church which prompted Nikolaus Pevsner to be almost positive: the church is described as 'decorated' and 'sumptuous' - but, alas, the sculpture is also 'barbaric', 'heavy' and 'very curious'.[2] Romanesque churches generally are well-provided with sculpture, but a few are special: Healaugh is up there with Kilpeck, Elkstone, Iffley and Steetley.

The church is at the north end of the village, astride a ridge which continues northwest towards Bilton-in-Ainsty. The ground is particularly steep to east and west of the building, and this may have been the cause of structural problems. At the west end, the tower is rebuilt above the first 20 feet or so; a crack in the south side of the church needed repair in 1693, and there is one now above the nave doorway. Similarly, changes in fabric on the south wall of the chancel suggest more than just updating in the late 12th and the 15th centuries: rebuilding there could have been occasioned by structural failure. An apse is not a strong structure and the present over-long chancel could have replaced an apse and chancel standing somewhere within that rectangle. The church at Brayton has an even longer chancel, and Birkin shows us the kind of thing that might have existed at both Brayton and Healaugh.

Two main periods of work are indicated by the sculpture at the church. The doorway and chancel arch show no sign of the activity of Cluny, which was influential from the mid 1150s, but they have similarities to earlier works, so a date of around 1140-55 is suggested for those parts. The north arcade and priest's doorway would be dated after 1170 because of their waterleaf capitals.

The current dedication of the church is to St John the Baptist, but it is clear from the Cartulary of Healaugh Priory that in the 12th century the village church was known as St Helen's, while the priory itself was dedicated to St John Evangelist of the Park.[3] The cartulary also records various gifts by the local dynasty of landholders in the 12th century, that is, by the founders of Healaugh priory, the Hagets. It gives us relatively full - or tantalisingly vague, depending how you look at it - documentation for the family and for their

connections to the Church. Hagets were founders of, or donors to, several local religious houses, not just the priory: it was quite usual to support a variety of religious orders. The earliest recorded gift of this kind was made about 1140, when Bertram Haget allowed a hermit to settle in woodland down in the 'park' towards Wighill. About 1160, Bertram founded the Cistercian Synningthwaite priory, and two of his daughters entered it, one becoming the prioress, as might be expected. At some time between 1161 and 1184, Geoffrey Haget son of Bertram confirmed his father's grant to 'Gilbert the hermit and his successors'. One witness to this document was Radulpho Haget, Geoffrey's brother, perhaps a relative of the Ralph Haget who became abbot of Fountains and died in 1203. A Reginald Haget was incumbent at Healaugh around the end of the 12th century.

The first phase of sculpture at the church and the establishment of the hermitage therefore both date from the lifetime of Bertram Haget. The hermit Gilbert was a monk originating from the great Benedictine abbey of Marmoutier, near Tours, which was the mother house of Holy Trinity Priory in York. Gilbert's hermitage in the park flourished, it attracted others and eventually became a more formal community when an Augustinian priory was established at the site.[4] According to Leland this regularisation happened in the time of Geoffrey Haget, Bertram's son. By 1218, the priory appears in a charter of Bertram's granddaughter Alice and her husband Jordan de Santa Maria: Alice had inherited Healaugh from her mother Alice de Friston (née Haget).

Sculptural richness is sometimes assigned to the activity of a secular patron constructing his own private chapel. Neither the building nor consecration of this small church is recorded, but a gift of land and promises of incense by the widowed Alice de Santa Maria or Haget to St Helen's are recorded. Thus, even supposing the building had been erected in the first instance as a private chapel - which its prominent position at the end of the village street would suggest never was the case - St Helen's seems to have served as a parish church quite soon. The church was granted to the priory at the end of the 14th century and it was appropriated by it in 1425. There is space here to discuss in detail only the most important sculpture, that over the main entrance.

The sculpture on the south doorway

The state of the carved work is relatively good even though the doorway is exposed to the worst of the weather. The reason for this was suggested to me by the late Jim Lang; it is that in this windy spot the stone dries out quickly before acid rain has much chance to sink in. Quite a contrast with doorways at Fishlake, Birkin, Brayton and Riccall which are plagued by lingering mist or groundwater and show more damp and consequent decay. All these doorways are works of 'the Yorkshire School', an elastic term covering examples of

figurative sculpture of the 1130s to 50s.[5]

The sculpture on the doorway at Healaugh is easily divisible in a symmetrical manner into distinct passages, each with its own characteristic motifs (Fig. 1). Symmetry spoke of perfection to an age seeking order in civil life: God's order was conventionally expressed by symmetry, and in geometrical forms generally.[6] Each of the passages describes a conflict of good and evil, as detailed below. The four sets of motifs have various origins, and some possible sources will be suggested afterwards.

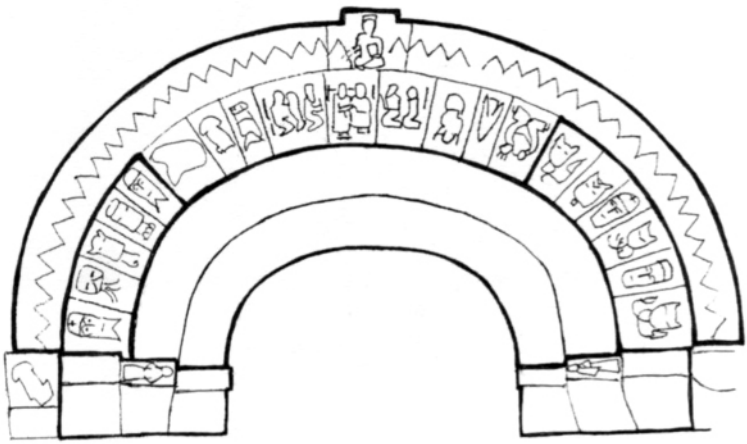

Figure 1. Diagram of the doorway and its divisions

The capitals and imposts on both sides of the doorway form the first area to be discussed (Fig. 2). There is much confusing detail here but the whole work would initially have been painted in simple colours, making it easier to distinguish the various areas and to read individual carvings. The capitals have foliage trails issuing from human heads or animal masks; there are two lions, a horse and a dog among the foliage. Here too are spirals of a type also used on the chancel arch imposts, and the occasional leaf. These growths are decidedly disordered and aimless, not upright and flourishing like those on the chancel arch - the distinction between orderly and tangled foliage is one which lends itself to a parallel with created order and sin. On the capitals most of the foliage is tangled, not beautiful: on the chancel arch, spirals, like springing ferns, suggest strong new life and resurrection. Any rhythm or symmetry, such as it is, in the lowest areas of the doorway is on the imposts. In the jargon, all this is 'marginal', and we, standing below it, surely must be marginal too. Fanciful decoration in a Gothic manuscript is often speculated upon but

hard to explain: was it done to show off the artist's dexterity, to amuse the patron or might it even be subversive?

Figure 2. Capitals and imposts on the right side of the doorway

Such light-hearted suggestions are not viable here because they would not account for the carving on the imposts of the second order of one wise and one foolish virgin from the parable in Matthew 25.[7] The figures are placed horizontally and have decayed, but in 1990 it was still possible to recognise the bump which was the flaming torch held by the wise virgin: now the stratification in the stone is more prominent.[8] In the parable, these girls waiting at a door represent those who are ready and those who are unprepared for the great feast in heaven at the end of time. As medieval theologians would have understood such parables, there is an immediate, moral, sense in which this might have been seen as a warning to those entering the church at any service; and there is a future, spiritual or eschatological, interpretation relating to the Last Judgement. This second reading ties in with the observation that only the imposts have any symmetry or perfection. The masks and men's heads emitting foliage, and a pattern of arcading on the imposts are motifs that can refer to the new life and order of heaven. The disorderly foliage trails and animals on the capitals below more resemble the present world, in which there are haphazard glimpses of created order behind everything, but generally

God's will for his creation is seen to be thwarted. The imposts and capitals together may depict 'waiting for the coming of the bridegroom' - living this life on the threshold of the next.

Figure 3. Beakheads

The two innermost arches may be taken together: the roll-moulded arch and that full of beakheads (Fig. 3). The plain first arch could have been painted in one colour - say white or yellow-ochre - literally to highlight the entrance to the holy space. At the entrance to the church, a pure, bright, arch would present a visual barrier to all these nasties in the second order - perhaps red and black for them! They have wicked eyes and a prominent pointed beak, their ears show that they are not natural birds. The malevolent 'other' nature of beakheads is appreciated intuitively. They encircle the doorway as if ready to pounce on those going in or out, their likeness to birds suggests they fly, and they could thus represent the evil spirits - fallen angels - which were believed to be ever present and ready to prey on mankind. The sculpture in the two arches depicts a cosmic opposition of good and evil. On doorways elsewhere, beakheads have an order of chevrons beside them, and in these

cases it is zigzag patterns that denote light or, more specifically, spiritual power. On Healaugh's doorway, however, chevrons are reserved for use in the uppermost part.

The lower parts of the third order on both sides contain men's heads outnumbered by a variety of bestial masks (Fig. 4). At Brayton and Birkin a few very similar crowned heads are in an order of beakheads, and both combinations can be seen as picturing the believer among evil spirits. The deliberately-distorted foliage in the mouths of some of the masks again depicts the destructive effect of evil on things created perfect. These passages could picture individual believers persevering in the midst of their particular problems and temptations; they are crowned as if already in heaven (Revelation 2:10).

Figure 4. A man's head and a mask

The upper part of the third order and the entire hoodmould contain the dramatic climax of the doorway: it is Judgement day. The scene shows the acceptance by God of the obedient, and the doom of sinners. The sudden appearance of Christ with the lightning (the chevron pattern) brings about an instantaneous separation of the good and the bad. This concept of the Judgement, like the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, is taken from St Matthew's gospel, in this case, chapter 24:27, 30-31. Among the human figures

in the third order, to the left is a now-headless animal - probably a lion - and on the right a pigeon-like bird, both of these looking downwards. These creatures, together with Christ seated at the apex, suggest a Trinity. Their presence in a Judgement is unusual, so perhaps there is a secondary idea, for example, that God the Trinity is always watching the world, even now, before Judgement Day.

There were originally thirteen individual figures in the third order, but five have been broken off. Seven of the eight complete figures are grouped together in the centre. They wear contemporary dress and are seated on wooden settles. The couple at the centre are arm in arm, there is a footstool for the lady, and to the left a child is held on its mother's lap: the whole has the appearance of a family group. The eighth complete figure is of a woman upside-down and falling, she is tearing her hair in despair at her fate. The five broken figures were also upside-down and falling. One is a single figure, and there are two couples which can be reconstructed from the fragments that remain as kneeling facing each other and embracing - decorously dressed in nightshirts. It is noteworthy that it is the carvings of the damned that have been broken, while the righteous who acclaim their Redeemer remain unscathed. Whoever broke the figures seems to have understood the distinction.

There is a regular sequence of figures on each side - a falling couple; a (suggested) Person of the Trinity; one falling sinner; the central group of seated, centre-facing people, and repeat. The focus is on the couple who sit facing outwards, but they are not symmetrically placed in relation to the arch. They are not in the centre, but to the left of it; there are three figures even further to the left, but only two on the right, compounding the imbalance. If these seven people are the righteous, how is their deliberate asymmetry to be explained?

At the apex, leaning forward in his square-headed niche, sits Christ. His left arm and book are worn, his right arm is extended to bless but the lower arm and hand are broken away. It seems at first as if this was a right hand blessing in the usual way, that is, raised vertically and blessing generally.[9] But, considering that the odd asymmetry in the order below must have a reason, a better suggestion can be made (Fig. 5). The remaining drapery about Christ's upper right arm would allow for his lost right hand to have been extended forwards or downwards, so that he was giving a particular blessing to the man and woman immediately below it.[10] This couple must be the patrons of the doorway, Bertram Haget and his wife, blessed for their benevolence; alongside them sit members of their household or family in due order. It is very rare for a patron to be depicted at this early date, though common enough in later centuries.[11]

Figure 5. Christ and the Hagets

The two men facing inwards towards Bertram and his wife hold short rods with box-like terminals - some sort of staff of office. Precedence of one over the other must be implied by their seating since it worsens the asymmetry, and seniority may also be indicated by the belt-of-strength worn by the man on our left. Is this Bertram's right-hand man in Healaugh, perhaps his son-in-law John de Friston? It is not likely to be his son Geoffrey, because *he* died without issue - so perhaps that is Geoffrey on our right. In the 1180s a Geoffrey Haget was a king's justice, perhaps it is the same man, and he had inherited his father's yearning for the triumph of good over evil.

The conflicts expressed elsewhere in the doorway are resolved by the Last Judgement. The several visual languages present different aspects of the theme, and a text in St. Matthew's gospel gives it a precise focus. The message of the doorway can be put into words but is most effectively absorbed by being taken in visually: it is a message which would have been accessible to an illiterate parishioner with minimal assistance.

Some sources for the imagery

The various sets of motifs on the doorway can now be examined for their sources: first, the capitals and imposts. While figures entwined in or among strands of leafy foliage are common in art of this period, the particular spiral forms used here are not. However, a parallel for these spirals (and perhaps the lions in them) occurs, for example, on an ivory hunting horn now in a museum in Aachen, which is thought to be South Italian work of c.1000. The parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins is a mainstream subject in this period, and occurs in Aquitaine as well as Yorkshire. A pair of crouching lions at the doorway (as possibly to left and right here) are seen in Italy, southern France, Spain and the Rhineland.

Orders of beakheads are something of a speciality in Yorkshire and they are usually assigned an Anglo-Saxon or Scandinavian ancestry.[12] On the other hand, bestial masks probably derive from classical art, though there are two unusual forms at Healaugh which may have other origins. It is noticeable that, as a general rule, masks are varied in form, they often occur singly and have foliage in their mouths, while beakheads are alike, usually massed and have seldom caught anything. Masks are antagonistic to foliage, that is, created Life, whereas beakheads oppose Light, the essence of God. It is unusual to have both beakheads and masks on the same doorway, and the two are not mixed at Healaugh. Orders of masks together with men's heads are found in western France. Deformed foliage occurs on a doorway at Barton-le-Street, where the corbel table has been compared to work in Poitiers.

In the upper part of the doorway, although the text used is from St Matthew's gospel, much of the imagery is modelled on illustrations found in copies of Beatus' commentary on the books of Daniel and Revelation. These distinctive manuscripts were produced in Spain in isolation from mainstream Western art between the 8th and 11th centuries.[13] One example of this influence is the seated figure of Christ, though the details are hard to see because the stone is blackened. Christ is not enthroned but sits cross-legged and he is wearing trousers, both indications of Moorish influence and seen in the Spanish drawings. In a Beatus manuscript now in Paris, Christ at the Second Coming appears in a mandorla of chevrons and the faithful greet him with extended hands; elsewhere sinful men are shown tearing their hair in despair like the falling woman at Healaugh. The falling couples have their counterpart in the Silos Beatus where there is a couple, complete with bed, in Hell. [14]

Conclusion

The doorway is self-evidently a layman's project, for no clerical designer would place a real-life secular household so prominently. The repetition of the theme in a variety of visual languages, rather than a scheme intricately bound together by numerous texts, supports the view that the content was motivated

by the personal enthusiasm of someone who was, at best, not accustomed to reading but who was very sensitive to visual logic. This is not to deny that the design must have benefited from clerical editing, but there remains this very personal emphasis on representation. What might have inspired Bertram Haget to provide this doorway?

A major church nearby might well motivate a patron, as it has been suggested work at the Minster impressed Roger de Stuteville, builder of Stillingfleet;[15] thus it is possible that the lost church at Holy Trinity Priory, York, was an inspiration for Healaugh. It is quite likely that workmen from there were called in to carve and construct it because features, notably the box frame around Christ, resemble work at Adel and Barton-le-Street, churches which belonged to Holy Trinity Priory. The use of imagery seen in south-west France again suggests the influence of the priory, a dependency of Marmoutier abbey in the Loire valley. It was from that abbey that Gilbert the hermit-monk originated - surely Bertram and Gilbert must have discussed this project at length. Perhaps, then, Gilbert the monk had settled in York, and all these various models were present at Holy Trinity.

However, no other such clear reproductions of Spanish illuminations have been recognised elsewhere in Yorkshire's sculpture, nor in England that the writer knows of. The doorway at Adel, although it has an unusual detail of falling stars (Matt. 24:29), does not reproduce features peculiar to Beatus' illuminations. The diverse sources contributing to this sculpture at Healaugh could be rationalised into a series of powerful impressions and actual portable mementos gathered on pilgrimage. George Zarnecki has already shown that several of the sculptural motifs used in Herefordshire had originally been seen in France by the patron of Shobdon and his sculptor on pilgrimage.[16] Perhaps Bertram Haget went as far as Compostella, but it may not have been necessary for him to have travelled further than the great monastery near Tours, which then had store enough of treasures, of ivories and manuscripts, to supply what we see at Healaugh. It might be supposed that a pilgrimage was undertaken by Bertram Haget, that he visited Marmoutier, was dazzled by Spanish manuscripts, and that he may even have returned to Yorkshire with Gilbert the would-be hermit in his company.

It is often implied, and these days sometimes assumed, that the amazing sculptural displays at some of the smaller 12th-century churches were motivated by competition and emulation among peers. But we can detect something more than that in the case of Healaugh. This patron was motivated by his perception of the all-pervading opposition of good and evil, by the reality of hell and the hope of heaven. Landholders did exist who felt a personal responsibility for establishing religious communities to pray for those struggling with evil in the world, and for building churches in which they and the rest of the laity might seek God's mercy and help.

Endnotes

Almost all the following references can be consulted at the York Minster Library

[1] This paper reworks a lecture given to YAYAS in October 2003. Photographs by Gerry Fountain, George Gregory and the author. For another doorway, see R. Wood, 'The Romanesque doorway at Foston Church' YPS Annual Report for 1996 (York 1997).

[2] N. Pevsner, *Yorkshire: West Riding* (Harmondsworth, rev. 1967), pp. 257-8.

[3] Dugdale, *Mon. Ang.*, VI, 438, charter I; *The Chartulary of the Augustinian Priory of St John the Evangelist of the Park*, ed. J. Purvis, YAS Record Series xcii (Wakefield 1936).

[4] Robert of Knaresborough's hermitage by the river can be visited, Grid Ref. SE 361561. The site was acquired by the Trinitarian order in the thirteenth century.

[5] G. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture, 1140-1210* (London 1953), pp. 34-45.

[6] R. Wood, 'Geometric Patterns in English Romanesque Sculpture', *J. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.*, 154 (2001) pp.1-39.

[7] Further examples in R. Wood, 'The Romanesque Doorways of Yorkshire, with special reference to that at St Mary's Church, Riccall', *Yorks. Archaeol. J.*, 66 (1994), fig. 7.

[8] Eventually, full photographic coverage of Healaugh's sculpture will appear as an entry in the *Corpus of Romansque Sculpture in Britian and Ireland*, on the www.crsbi.ac.uk web-site.

[9] The diagram, Wood, 'Romanesque Doorways', fig. 2, assumed the usual pose.

[10] Compare an Ottonian ivory carving, J. Beckwith, *Early Medieval Art*, (London 1964) fig. 109.

[11] A duke and a king are carved presenting churches: G. Zarnecki, *Gislebertus Sculptor of Autun*, (Paris 1961) p.70, pls. 13a, B10.

[12] J. Salmon, 'Beakhead ornament in Norman architecture', *Yorks. Archaeol. J.* 36 (1944-47), pp. 349-57.

[13] The influence of a Spanish Beatus manuscript on the sculpture of the great tympanum at Moissac: E. Mâle, *Religious Art in France: the twelfth century*, (trans. Princeton 1978), pp.4-11.

[14] J. Williams, *Early Spanish Manuscript Illumination*, (London 1977), pl. 40.

[15] P. V. Addyman & I. H. Goodall, 'The Norman Church and Door at Stillingfleet, North Yorkshire' *Archaeologia* 106 (1979), p.81.

[16] G. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture, 1140-1210* (London 1953), pp. 9, 10, 12-14. A later work is 'The priory church of Shobdon and its founder', in *Studies in Medieval Art and Architecture presented to Peter Lasko*, ed. D. Buckton and T. A. Heslop (London 1994), 211-220.