

Paper 2

The Romanesque Doorway at Foston Church

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The Romanesque Doorway at Foston Church

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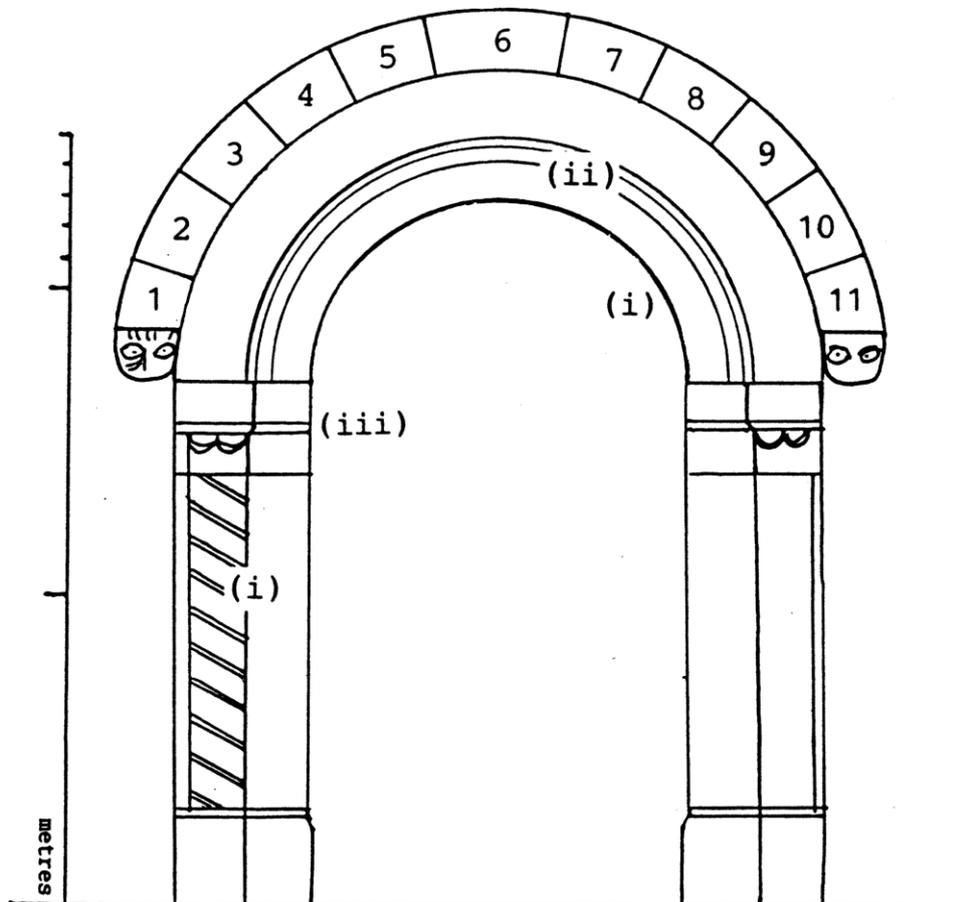


Figure 1 The Foston doorway

The village of Foston is 'twelve miles from a lemon', off the Malton Road.[1] The church is kept locked, but the twelfth-century south doorway is always accessible. The figurative carving is shallow, the sandstone weathered and there has been some damage. To begin to appreciate it fully, the doorway has to be reconstructed in the imagination, with restoration of the stone and then with an application of colour.[2] Even so, the sophistication of the decoration would hardly have equalled that of the sculpture on major buildings, but this work could have been clear and bright enough to enable the detail in each carving to be read with ease.

There are several features of this doorway that seem to date it to mid-century or before. These are the modest size of the work, the double scallop capitals and heavy impost, the figurative areas being on the hoodmould and not on the inner orders, the crude outline and shallow carving of figures, the lack of a unifying formal pattern in these areas, and the possible Scandinavian details of the haunches of the animals 1 and 11. However, it is possible to distinguish several later features. Two of these are the type of leaves and stems carved on the left reveal, frequent in the 1150s to 1160s, and the mouldings on the inner orders, of a kind that did not become widespread in Yorkshire until the later 1160s.[3] Thirdly, a very similar motif to the 'fleurons'[4] on the first order is seen in the arches of the reconstructed Chapter House entrance in the St Mary's Gallery of the Yorkshire Museum. There, fleurons fill the spaces in hyphenated chevron and some of the arches are pointed, both of these are late, even Transitional, features. By the 1160s the manor of Foston, and presumably the church with it, were held by St Mary's Abbey.[5]

The Patterns used on the Arches and Jambs

The three patterns immediately adjacent to the entrance at Foston can be understood as suggesting a holy place, Heaven or Paradise within the church.

(i) The Spiral and Cable Pattern In the twelfth century, following classical and early Christian models, spirally carved pillars tended to be depicted flanking especially important places, and one is shown in this way at Riccall.[6] The right hand column at Foston appears not to have been carved, but would have been painted, perhaps with a spiral. The cable pattern on the soffit of the first order continues the spiral motif, so the door could well have been encircled by honorific decoration signifying 'holy ground'.

(ii) The Arc of Fleurons In a Romanesque context, it is misleading to associate such motifs with flowers. There are many examples from this period in which flower-like forms must be interpreted as sources of light, whether physical or spiritual. The arc of fleurons here probably represents the stars of the firmament. This indicates once again that at the church door we pass to heavenly things.

(iii) The Panel of Foliage This has three-strand stems, with binding at the fork, and fluted, palmate leaves seen in profile. There are also two fleurons. Writing of a fifteenth-century Scandinavian church's painted ceiling, Patrik Reutersward says 'one gets very much the impression that all this greenery, and the rosettes and the stars, acted as... paradisaal stage properties'.[7] Elsewhere in

Yorkshire, foliage is used as a symbol of new or heavenly life, when it streams freely from the mouth of 'Death' or forms the symmetrical (perfect) patterns on its own. The meaning of a holy or heavenly place is also seen, for example, in the display at Fishlake, where the innermost order has a pattern of trees, while the outer orders have their own distinct narrative. At Adel, a doorway of five orders focuses attention strongly on the entrance, while the gable above has a Second Coming, which is excluded from the decoration. We have some written indications as to how these entrances were used liturgically,[8] but nothing of the manner in which the sculpture was to be read, except for evidence such as this. In modern times, individual subjects in an arch would be considered clockwise from lower left, as the hoodmould is numbered in Figure 1. The figurative scheme at Malmesbury, with Biblical scenes on the exterior arches of the porch, is read clockwise in each order, and from the innermost outwards. At Healaugh and Bishop Wilton, however, there are distinct meanings to sections within one arch, and other doorways (Riccall and Brayton) have a library of apparently random subjects. In other words, there was no one way of reading a doorway.

The Carvings on the Hoodmould (Figures 2 and 3)

These form no obvious narrative. Several designs are set on fluted circular 'dishes' which may be compared to Roman and Byzantine conches on ivories and tombs, but this distinction of decoration is of no significance in their interpretation. In the necessarily brief notes that follow, stones 1 and 11 are discussed together, the remainder in numerical order.

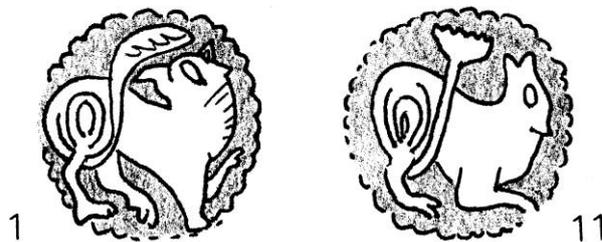


Figure 2 The animals on voussoirs 1 and 11 of the hoodmould. All drawings in Figures 2 and 3 show the view along the radius of the arch.

1 and 11 Animals These have traces of a mane and flourished tails, which is enough to show that they are lions. They may therefore refer to bestiary tales about the incarnate Christ, and if so, direct the eye and mind to stone 6. The Lion can be a symbol for God, and so the three carvings considered together might

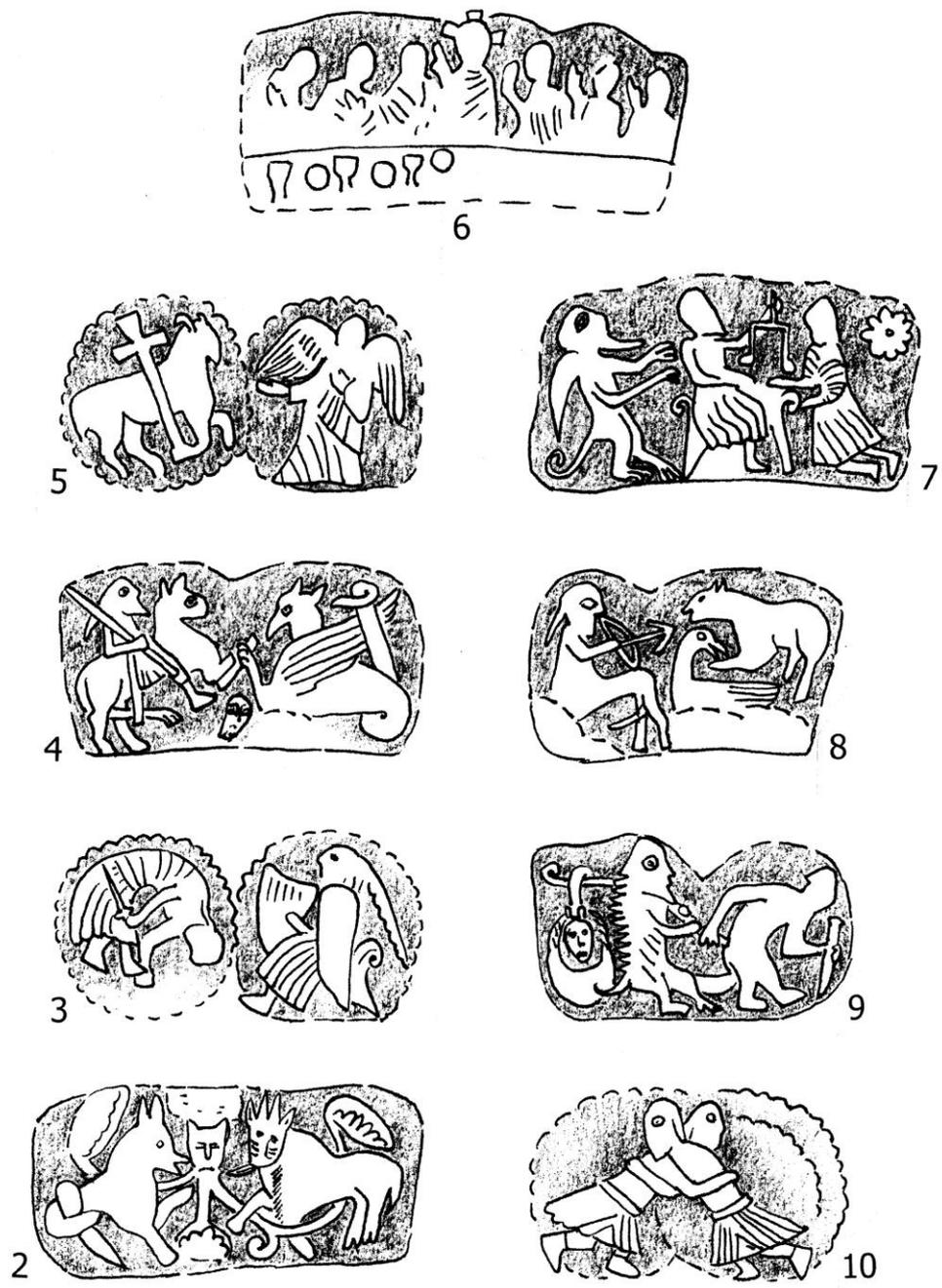


Figure 3 The figurative carvings on voussoirs 2 to 10.
 Approximate height of a carving is 20 cm.

suggest a Trinity. The lions enclose the remainder of the figurative scheme, and perhaps may be said to protect it from the evil-looking masks on the label-stops.

2 Confronted animals with a lion's head between them The three parts of this composition need careful disentangling. The animal on the left touches the central motif with one foot and with its open mouth seems to bite at it. The animal on the right puts out its tongue to lick the central motif. Some damage had made a groove from the neck down the chest to the leg of this animal. The centre is more conjectural. A conventional lion's head faces outwards – it is not a grotesque mask like the label-stops. Above this head is an indeterminate wider mass. From the mouth of the lion three bands emerge, the third of which again forks between the front legs of the right-hand animal. These bands end in three leaf-like flourishes and one curl.[9]



Figure 4 Lintel at Llanbadarn Fawr. After Keyser, *Tympana and Lintels*, Figure 41.

At Llanbadarn Fawr, Radnorshire,[10] a similar composition shows confronted animals feeding from the Tree of Life (Figure 4). This Tree grows out of a forward-facing lion's head. Beside the head is a star or light, indicating the eternal light of Paradise (Rev. 2:7b; 22:2, 5). The scene at Foston seems to be of a related subject, showing the four rivers that diverge from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:10). This text has long been seen as referring to the heavenly Paradise described in Revelation 22:1, '... the rivers of waters of life... proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb'. That the 'lamb' of the text is pictured here as a lion is a mutation that occurs in Revelation itself (5:5-6). Out of reverence, presumably, a symbolic lion is substituted for the lamb at Fishlake also. Other texts (John 4:13-14 and 7:37-38) record Christ declaring himself as the source of living, or eternal, water. The carving may therefore be interpreted as a scene in Paradise. From the top: a basin or fountain of water; the lion's head acting as a spout, and the four rivers from which the animals (the blessed) drink in peace (Revelation 21:6b).

3 A dancer and a harpist The dancer is juggling with a sword, just as entertainers did in the twelfth century. The harpist has her hair in a plait or hair-net. The chair on which she sits is like that on stone 7. Dancing was often condemned by the church as being sensual, and leading to worse things: Salome is presented dancing with swords in contemporary illumination.[11] The scene is a warning and perhaps a call to repentance.

4 A man and a dragon The horseman is lightly-equipped compared to one in a similar encounter at Bishop Wilton. The man is bare-headed, not wearing mail and has his lance at rest. We may suppose that the craftsman drew this from his own experience: the dragon is more sophisticated, and for this unfamiliar creature, a drawing was probably supplied for model. The head on the ground between horse and dragon shows that it is not 'St George' we see here, appearing in support of crusaders (as at Fordington, Hants.) or rescuing a maiden in distress (as in later medieval legends), but it is Christ who battles to deliver man from Death. The head on the ground recalls Golgotha, the 'place of the skull', and also the idea that the cross was erected over the burial place of Adam.[12] The real model for the scene is the Crucifixion.

5 The Agnus Dei and an angel The visions recorded in the book of Revelation were shown to John by an angel (Rev. 22:8-9). The worship of the Lamb is described in Rev. 5:11-13 and 14:1.

6 The Last Supper The carving is very worn, but the scene is much as in a Canterbury Psalter of c. 1140.[13] The apostles' conventional attitudes can still be read, and cups and loaves alternate along the table. The historical event shown is Jesus at supper with his disciples (Matthew 26:17-30). However, the spiritual meanings to be found in the subject would have interested the monk-designer most, particularly if the carving was intended to show the incident known to the Church as the Institution of the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Further, sculpture at Kirkburn links the Eucharist to the Messianic Banquet, the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6-9; Matt. 25:1-13) an eschatological event.

7 A demon, a seated man and a kneeling man The subject, 'Weighing a soul', elaborates on the Last Judgment. A seated figure holds up the scales. It is unusual for a human figure to be in this role, for almost always is it the standing winged archangel Michael who does this. Whether the difference is due to the ignorance of the craftsman, or to the use of a source near to the proven origin of the scene in Egyptian tomb-art, is not known. From the left a demon touches the seated man on the shoulder. This is a variation of the usual activity of the demon, tipping the scales in its favour. On the right the dead man pleads for mercy. Behind the kneeling man is a fleuron or light source. An exact iconographic

parallel has not been found. It is suggested that this light somehow 'balances' the demon, that it is the light of Paradise (Rev. 22:5), or of Christ (John 8:12), or perhaps signifies Judgment itself (John 23:21).

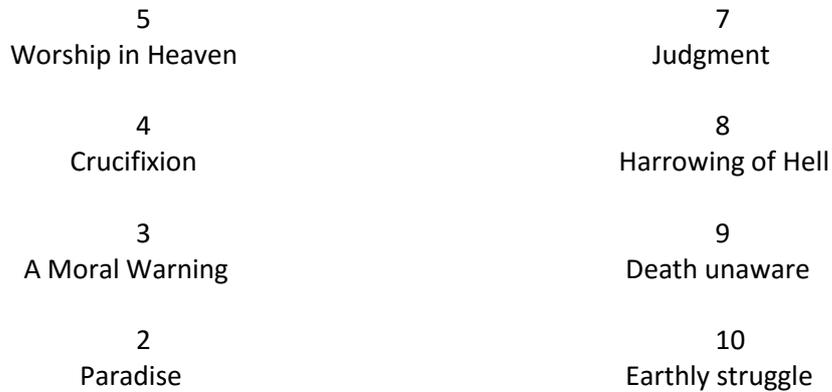
8 A centaur, a fox(?) and a goose This carving can be described as a fable extended with a Christian message. The bow describes the Crucifixion, the arrow 'his soul's flight to Hades'. [14] The fox (Death) is about to be made powerless, and the goose (Mankind) freed. The carving is an allegory of the 'Harrowing of Hell'.

9 A demon with a yoke and a man The demon already has one head in its basket on the back of the yoke. It stabs or hooks a traveller who is going along the road with the help of a stick. The carving probably shows Death catching man unawares, and, if so, pre-dates better known medieval paintings on the same theme, which are common from the fourteenth century.

10 Wrestlers The evenly matched men seem to be engaged in Cumberland wrestling, as a similar pair on a pre-Conquest stone were described by the late Jim Lang in a lecture to the Philosophical Society in 1996. In that context the motif is often said to be 'Jacob and the Angel' (Gen. 32:24), but if so, the narrative sense has been lost sight of to the extent that the 'angel' has no wings. In contrast, Jacob stories showing the 'Dream of the Ladder' and the 'Wrestling' have a winged angel when carved in the twelfth century at Autun (France) and Gerona (Spain). At least one of the Fathers linked the story to man's interior struggle, and Augustine writes of a 'kind of daily battle going on in the inner self' and cites Galatians 5:17 and Romans 7:22, 23. It is suggested that the pair of wrestlers is either a spiritual interpretation of the Jacob story, or a straightforward illustration of St. Paul's words 'The desires of the flesh are against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh'. [15] Recent work on Irish high crosses, where the paired figures occur up to the mid-tenth century, suggests some connection was being made with John the Baptist and with baptism. [16] Pairs of fighters occur on twelfth-century fonts, for example, at Avington (Berks), Eardisley (Herefs) and Wansford (Northants), perhaps to teach that the interior struggle begins at birth or baptism. This could explain the presence of another pair of wrestlers, below Nativity scenes at Notre Dame la Grande, Poitiers (France), with reference to Hebrews 4:15. The subject of voussoir 10 at Foston is likely to be man's life-long interior struggle.

If the meanings just assigned are substituted for the drawings in Figure 3 we see that connections exist between subjects on either side of the arch, and that there is a sequence of thought upwards.

6
The Eucharist
The Messianic Banquet



The scheme might be summarised as teaching the baptised the way to heaven. The exposition would start at the bottom by describing the immediate earthly struggle (10) and encouraging initiates with the promise of Paradise (2) for the faithful. Next, a warning to avoid the sins of the flesh (3), for Death might take the sinner unprepared (9). Christ, by confronting and overcoming Death, frees the believer from original sin (4 and 8). God's mercy will bring the soul through the Judgment (7) to his presence in Heaven (5) to partake at the wedding feast of the Lamb (6), a feast foreshadowed by the real presence at the Eucharist within the church.

Acknowledgements

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References

- [1] Sydney Smith, vicar of Foston 1807-1829. His lemons would have been in York.
- [2] Ann Brodrick, 'Painting Techniques of Early Medieval Sculpture', in *Romanesque*, exhibition catalogue, Henry Moore Sculpture Trust, Leeds, 1993.

- [3] Rita Wood, 'The Romanesque Doorways of Yorkshire', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, 66 (1994), p.61; Foston is listed with Kirkburn (c.1140). Rita Wood, 'The Romanesque doorway at Fishlake', *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 72, (2000), pp. 20-22 for the foliage.
- [4] Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: The North Riding*, 1966, p. 164.
- [5] Victoria County History, *Yorkshire North Riding*, ii, 1968, p. 135.
- [6] E. Fernie, 'The Spiral Piers of Durham Cathedral', *BAA Conference Transactions*, III, 1980, pp. 49-58; Wood 1994, *op. cit.* in note 3, pp. 73-74; *Exodus* 3:2-6.
- [7] Patrik Reuterswärd, *Forgotten Symbols of God*, III, 1985, p. 112. Decorative features of the Romanesque period continued longer in use in Scandinavia than in England.
- [8] S. A. J. Bradley, 'Quem aspicientes viverent', *Antiquaries' J.* LXVIII 2, 1988, pp. 223-237.
- [9] The foreshortened central flourish and label-stop masks can be compared to details on the font at Alne, North Riding.
- [10] R. Haslam, *The buildings of Wales: Powys*, 1979, pp. 240-241.
- [11] See G. G. Coulton, *Life in the Middle Ages*, I, pp. 89-90; C. M. Kauffmann, *Romanesque Manuscripts, 1066-1190*, illus. 208; Mark 6:17-18. The dancer is not necessarily Salome here at Foston, as stated in Wood 1994, *op. cit.* in note 3, p. 77 due to misreading a bump in the stone. Elsewhere, the harpist is male.
- [12] Christ's 'battle': for example, in the eighth-century poem 'The Dream of the Rood', and in the representation of the Agnus Dei bearing a gonfalon or battle flag at Barton-le-Street; Adam: see Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien*, 2 ii, N.T., Paris 1957, pp. 488-489.
- [13] Kauffmann, *op. cit.* in note 11, illus. 178.
- [14] Wood 1994, *op. cit.* in note 3, p. 87. (Correction to Figure 9 in that article, see *YAJ* 1995, p. 192.) The text is given in M. D. Anderson, *The Medieval Carver*, 1935, pp. 100-101.
- [15] Gregory Nazianzen; Augustine, Sermon 53A.12; Galatians 5:17a.
- [16] Peter Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland*, I, 1992, p. 237 etc.
