

A Twelfth Century Workshop in Northampton

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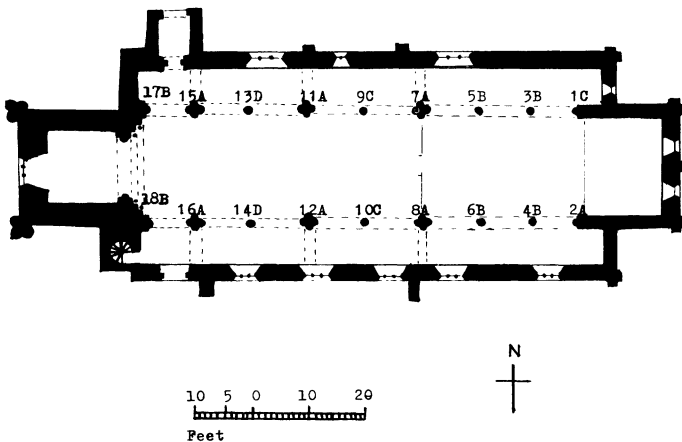
The twelfth century parish church of St. Peter in Northampton is remarkable for its rich, if somewhat rustic, carved decoration. It has been discovered that the workshop responsible for its ornamentation also carved a tomb slab in that church, and two fountains in villages near Northampton.¹ The purpose of this paper is to complete the list of surviving carvings that may be assigned to this workshop, and to ascertain its historical context.

One cannot deny that the sculpture of the workshop, which dates towards the middle of the twelfth century, makes a modest comparison with Continental work of this period. It is backward, even, in comparison with the best English work of the time, such as the sculptures on the west front of Lincoln Cathedral. However, the art of the workshop, rustic though it appears, conceals a knowledge of twelfth century Continental sculpture. A study of it will reveal the ways and means by which a conservative group of English carvers could reconcile foreign elements with their own native traditions.

The Products of the Workshop

In spite of two restorations, one perhaps of the early seventeenth century, and one of the mid-nineteenth, St. Peter's church still retains a great deal of Norman work in fine condition.² This is particularly true of the capitals of the nave and choir arcades, which were protected from damage by plaster until its removal in 1839.³

FIGURE 1. *Plan of St. Peter's Church, Northampton.*



The original plan of the church comprised a sanctuary, an aisled choir of three bays, an aisled nave of six bays, and a western tower (Fig. 1). The nave arcades are remarkable for their use of alternating supports, a motif unusual in English parish churches, but often employed in abbeys and cathedrals. In the case of St. Peter's the alternation is of round and quatrefoil piers. The round piers of the nave are further characterized by triple shaft rings about their middles—another unusual feature (Fig. 2). The choir has a single bay system, with circular piers carrying the arcades. The incorporation of shaft rings onto the second piers from the east on each side of the choir, however, suggests the alternating system of the nave. The sumptuous effect produced by the capitals, shaft rings, and alternating piers is increased by the zig-zag mouldings which, throughout the church, decorate the arcades.

At the west end of St. Peter's there is a finely ornamented tower arch. It was rebuilt, but from the original materials, when the tower was moved one bay to the east, it seems in the early seventeenth century.⁴ As a result of this alteration the nave is now only five bays long instead of the original six. The three orders of shafts which support the tower arch are decorated with zig-zag, basket-work, and lozenges. They carry carved capitals, and the arch itself is copiously enriched with zigzag. There is no corresponding arch into the chancel. Such a feature can never have existed, as there would not have been enough room for it; the transition between nave and choir is marked simply by the cessation of the alternating system of supports (Fig. 1).

The capitals of the tower arch and of the nave and choir arcades, as well as their corresponding abaci, are elaborately carved. Four principal groups of capitals may be distinguished. The first of these groups, which is designated by the letter "A" on the plan, is characterized by a decoration of wire-like coils, formed of a grooved strand, and often held together by beaded ties. The effect is reminiscent of the filigree spirals used as ornament by Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque goldsmiths.⁵ On some capitals the coils appear together with miniature columns. The shafts of the columns have a helical decoration, and they are capped by a beaded band. When they appear together, spirals and columns form an ordered and



FIGURE 2. *St. Peter's Church, Pier, 9C on plan.*



FIGURE 3. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 16A.*

symmetrical composition on the capital. But on other capitals the coiled strands cover the whole surface of the stone in an interlace of a much less controlled character (Fig. 3. Plan 16A). The same wiry coils, with their central groove, also feature on some of the figured capitals. We can find both birds and four-footed beasts (Fig. 4. Plan 8A) against such a background. On one capital a little man, whose legs are in the jaws of a "cat's head" mask, holds two plants which both have tops ending in grooved curls (Plan 12A).

The second group which may be distinguished amongst the capitals at St. Peter's uses the same motifs of spirals and miniature columns as the first, but in a rather cruder manner ("B" on the plan). The ties are not always beaded, and the spirals are of a simple ungrooved strand. The capitals, in general, lack the fine razor sharp cut which distinguishes those of the first style (Fig. 5. Plan 17B).

A third group of capitals is marked not by a similarity to metalwork, but by an apparent relationship to manuscript painting ("C" on the plan).⁶ The resultant carving displays the soft and sinuous forms of the foliage and animals of twelfth-century initial types. These forms include the three-leaved "Byzantine Blossom" (Fig. 6. Plan 10C). and numerous dragons with curled foliate tails (Fig. 7. Plan 1C).

Finally, we should distinguish a fourth type of capital, carved with a foliage quite different from that appearing on the capitals we have discussed ("D" on the plan). This foliage has broad leaves, like palm fronds, tied together at the top with bands. It occurs on two capitals, one with the leaves only (Fig. 8. Plan 14D), and one on which the foliage is combined with biting head masks (Plan 13D).

An interesting feature of the decoration of St. Peter's church is the correspondence between the different groups of capitals and the alternation of the piers. All the decorated capitals of the quatrefoil piers, with one exception (a clerestory capital, No. 8 on the plan) belong to the first group ("A" on the plan). All the capitals of the intermediate columns belong to the second, third, or fourth groups ("B", "C", and "D"). These are arranged in pairs. Thus, the capitals of the second piers from the west on the north and south sides of the nave are both of the fourth group (Nos. 13 and 14). The capitals of the fourth piers from the west are both of the third group (Nos. 9 and 10). The four capitals of the piers in the choir belong to the second group (Nos. 3, 4, 5, and 6).

The exterior of the church is as richly ornamented as the interior. On the north and south sides of the church there are continuous blank arcades along the clerestory,



FIGURE 4. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 8A.*



FIGURE 5. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 17B.*

and beneath the roof there are carved corbels. The present clerestory, however, is largely a nineteenth-century restoration by Sir Gilbert Scott. The reconstructed tower retains the voussoirs only of a large west doorway, which have been inserted above several courses of polychromatic masonry (Fig. 9). In its present disposition, this polychromy obviously belongs to the period of the seventeenth century rebuilding, but there is reason to believe that it was also present in the twelfth-century tower, as will be seen. The fine arcading on the second stage of the tower must also be an original feature.

The west doorway has been severely mutilated. Of the arch of the door there remain in place four orders of voussoirs (Fig. 10). The first is decorated with roll mouldings and a superimposed pattern of arcades. The second order displays squares of flatly carved diaper work, while the third combines diapered stones with others carved with knots and saltire crosses formed of leaves. The outermost order of voussoirs, according to an early nineteenth-century print, was once decorated with an interlace pattern.⁷ In general, the carving of these stones is remarkable for its chiselled clarity, which has survived the weather well, in spite of an exposed position. The squares do not reproduce any of the motifs to be seen inside the church.



FIGURE 6. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 10C.*

Before the restorations, the orders of the arch must have been supported on shafts with capitals. In the store-room of the Northampton museum there is a capital from St. Peter's, which entered the museum in the nineteenth century. Its dimensions and shape indicate that it could have come from the old west door.⁸ It possibly survives, as do the fragments in the north nave aisle of the church, from the seventeenth-century alteration of the position of the tower. If compared with the capitals of the interior of St. Peter's, this capital seems to bear most relation to the second group described above—that which combined crudely rendered columns with ungrooved spirals (Fig. 5).

We have seen, then, that an examination of the sculpture of the church of St. Peter reveals several different groups of carvings. This diversity, and the very extent of the work, suggests that the decoration of this church was due to a team of masons, rather than a single sculptor. If we now turn to the villages which lie immediately around Northampton, we shall discover other carvings by members of this workshop.

The village of Mears Ashby lies about seven miles to the north-east of Northampton. Its church, All Saints, preserves an octagonal font decorated with carving on seven faces.⁹ The motifs include rosettes, foliate saltires, and a diaper pattern, all of which are presented in square frames bordered by interlace (Fig. 11). The carving is extremely fine and sharp. The effect of these motifs, and of the crisp manner in which they are cut, is very similar to that made by the voussoirs of the west door at St. Peter's. It seems likely that this font was carved by one



FIGURE 7. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 1C.*



FIGURE 8. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 14D.*

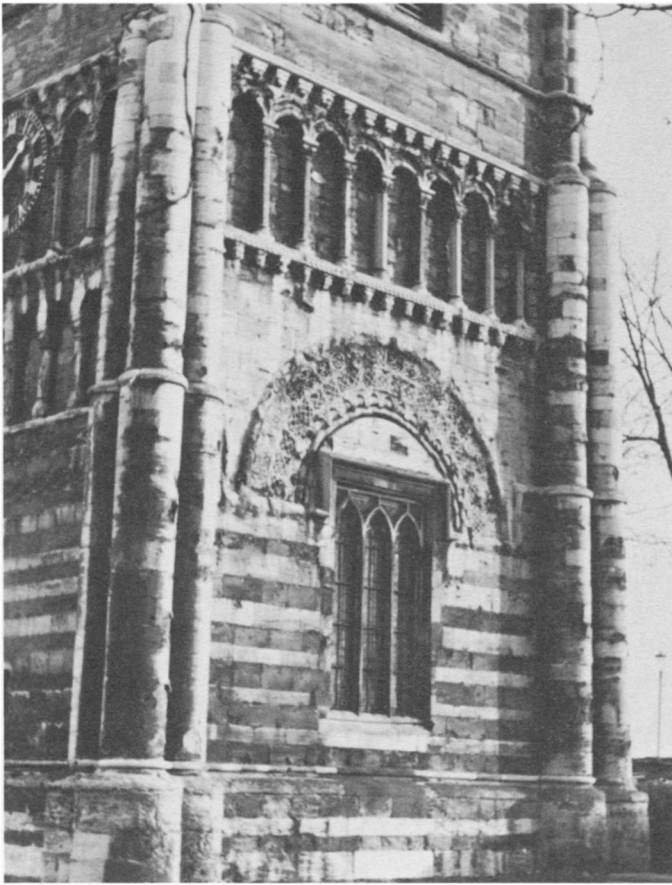


FIGURE 9. *St. Peter's Church, Tower.*

of those masons who undertook the decoration of the church in Northampton.

Another work that can be attributed to this group of sculptors is the tomb slab which is preserved in the south aisle of St. Peter's church itself (Fig. 12).¹⁰ This carving, like several of the capitals of the church, is closely related to manuscript painting. The three-leaved "Byzantine blossoms" motif on the slab compare with those on the nave capital shown in Figure 6. The motif of a dragon curled up in a circle, which appears at the bottom of the grave cover, is also carved on the side of one of the capitals in the choir of St. Peter's (Fig. 7). Such similarities between the decoration of the tomb slab, and that of the church in which it is housed, make it reasonable to suppose that both are due to the same workshop.

Another work which is very close to the carvings we have discussed is the font in the church at Harpole, a village some four miles to the west of Northampton.¹¹ On one side of the cylindrical bowl there are two beasts at a tree of life. The rendering of the tree may be compared with that of the foliage on the lower part of the grave cover in St. Peter's (Fig. 12). In each case there are the same thick, somewhat clumsy looking stems, decorated with incised lines and undersized leaves. The other side of the font is carved with leaves issuing from a column with a beaded top (Fig. 13). The form of these leaves is reminiscent of the palm fronds on the nave capital from St. Peter's illustrated in Figure 8.

A third font that can be attributed to our workshop is that in the church of St. Bartholomew in Green's Norton,

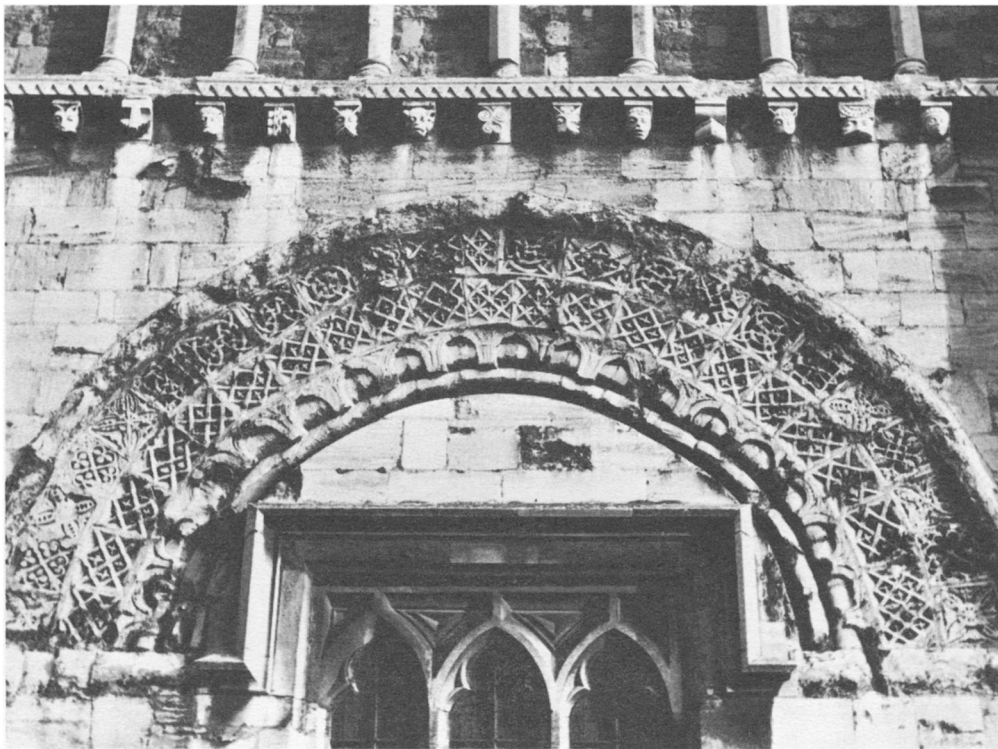


FIGURE 10. *St. Peter's Church, Former West Door.*

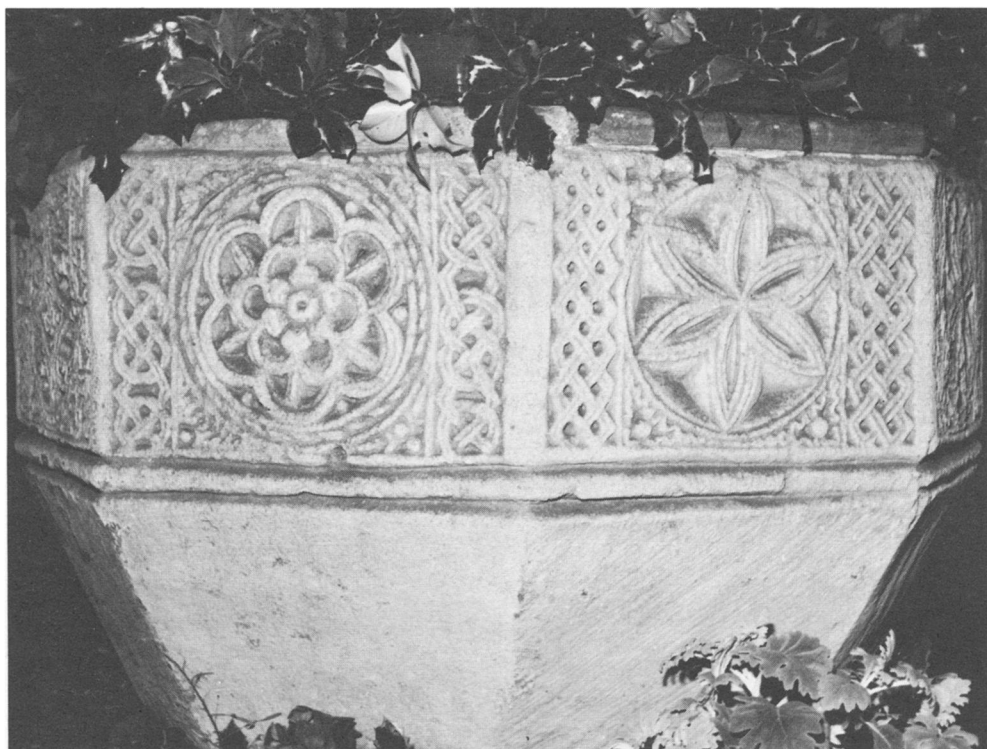


FIGURE 11. *Mears Ashby, Font.*

a village about ten miles south-west of Northampton. This piece is decorated with beaded lozenges, filled with flowers or leaves (Fig. 14). The leaves, with their scooped out segments, volutes, and beaded ties at the bases, are similar to the palm leaves on the Harpole font (Fig. 13), and on the capitals in St Peter's (Fig. 8).

Finally, there is a group of fonts assignable to the workshop, all of which employ the same pattern. The group comprises the fonts at Paulerspury, Dodford, Tiffield, and Weedon Lois in Northamptonshire, and at Maids' Moreton in Buckinghamshire. These villages are all within eighteen miles of Northampton. Every one of the fonts is decorated with one or two bands of linked and beaded lunettes around the bowl, each lunette containing foliage (Fig. 15). It must have been a standard workshop pattern, and only slight variations were made between the individual fonts. These variations, however, enable us to assign the whole group to the workshop that executed the carving at St. Peter's. On the font at St. Mary's, Dodford, the spaces between the two rows of lunettes are filled with four and eight-petalled flowers, exactly like those in the lozenges of the font at Green's Norton. And on the bowl at Paulerspury, the spaces below the lunettes are filled with pointed palmette leaves which can also be found on the Green's Norton font, along the lower border (Figs. 14 and 15).

We may, then, deduce from extant sculptures that the carvers who worked at St. Peter's were responsible for the

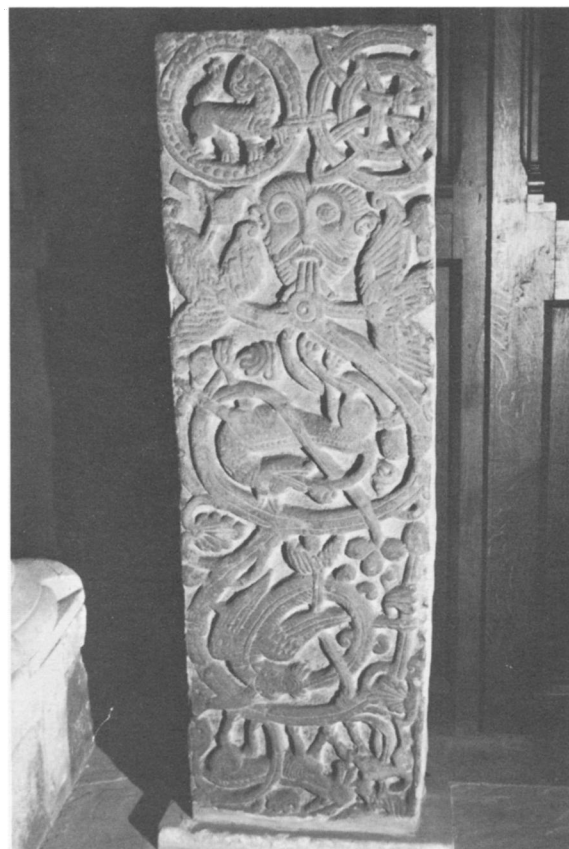


FIGURE 12. *St. Peter's, Northampton, Tomb Slab.*



FIGURE 13. *Harpole, Font.*



FIGURE 14. *Green's Norton, Font.*

fittings of no less than eight other churches.¹² Since the churches in which these carvings are found are all in the neighbourhood of Northampton, it seems most reasonable to assume that the workshop had its base in that town.

Historical Context of the Northampton carvings.

The elaborate ornamentation of St. Peter's, notable in itself, is the more exceptional for its application to a simple parish church. It has been pointed out by Nikolaus Pevsner that some details of the decorative scheme are more usually encountered in the fittings of abbeys or cathedrals.¹³ The case of the alternating system of supports has already been discussed. Another feature unusual for a parish church is the continuation of the shaft on the inner face of each quatrefoil pier up to roof level. Such wall shafts, however, appear commonly in major churches, where they often carry vault ribs. The grandiose conception of St. Peter's must have been inspired by some larger building with which the constructors of the parish church were acquainted.

It has been suggested that the richness of the work at St. Peter's may be explained by its proximity to the royal castle at Northampton.¹⁴ This was originally built by Simon of St. Liz, First Earl of Northampton, who died in the first twenty years of the twelfth century. However, by 1131 the castle had been taken over by the crown, and had assumed a considerable political importance. It was here that, in 1164, Becket was con-



FIGURE 15. *Paulerspury, Font.*



FIGURE 16. *Moulding from St. Andrew's Priory.*



FIGURE 17. *Eadwine Psalter, Cambridge, Trinity College, Ms. R. 17.1, fol. 200v.*

demned by the king's court.¹⁵ Recent excavations on the castle site have uncovered a large selection of mouldings, capitals, and columns from the building.¹⁶ Amongst these stones there are several enriched with zigzag moulding, and some of the column fragments sport lozenge or spiral decorations. But there is no carving as fine as the foliage and figure work at St. Peter's. Nor is there any documentary indication of a twelfth-century link between the church and the royal castle. Thus the hypothesis of a connection between Northampton castle and the workshop we have been discussing, though not impossible, has little evidence to support it.

There was, however, another great foundation in the town with which the masons of St. Peter's may have had contact—the priory of St. Andrew. This Cluniac house had been founded by Simon of St. Liz between 1093 and 1100.¹⁷ For the purpose he imported monks from the abbey of La Charité-sur-Loire, to which the priory was henceforth a cell. At the foundation of St. Andrew's, Simon confirmed the monks of La Charité in possession of their own church, and assigned to them the gift of all the other churches in Northampton. These gifts were confirmed by Henry I.¹⁸

The first documentary reference to St. Peter's church concerns its connection with St. Andrew's. We discover that, at the close of the twelfth century, Henry, prior of St. Andrew's, granted to Henry, son of Peter of Northampton, the church of St. Peter in that borough. An entry in the cartulary of the priory of St. Andrew states that the incumbent was instituted by the deputies of Bishop Hugh of Lincoln, who held office from 1186 to 1200. In the early thirteenth century Hugh Wells, bishop of Lincoln from 1209 to 1235, confirmed St. Andrew's priory in possession of St. Peter's, amongst the other churches of the town. In 1222, however, when the living fell vacant, there was a quarrel between the monks of St. Andrew's and the king over the right of presentation. The dispute continued, but it seems clear that at the end of the twelfth century, at any rate, the right of presentation to St. Peter's was firmly in the hands of the St. Andrew's brethren.¹⁹

The dispute with the crown entered into by the monks of St. Andrew's in 1222 was not the only occasion upon which they quarrelled with others over their rights. The advowson of the church of Mears Ashby was granted to the abbey of Aunay (south of Bayeux) by Richard de Humez and Agnes his wife, sometime before the year 1159.²⁰

But in 1186, perhaps after some disagreement, Robert, prior of St. Andrew's, entered into a contract with Vivyan, abbot of Aunay, whereby the tithes of Mears Ashby were thenceforth granted to the monks of the French abbey. The brethren of St. Andrew's were, however, in rightful possession of several other village churches in Northamptonshire, and Hugh Wells confirmed them in possession of no less than thirteen.²¹

Unfortunately, we cannot be sure whether the relationship between St. Andrew's priory and the churches in its possession extended to sculpture. The church at the priory has totally disappeared. All that survives is a fragment of a small column, decorated with lozenges, and six pieces of moulding.²² These stones were discovered in a nineteenth century excavation of the site of St. Andrew's priory church. As there are no precise reports from the excavation, it is impossible to be certain of the exact provenance of these stones. They do, however, tell us that the church at St. Andrew's was enriched with some careful carving.

It is interesting that the decoration on the fragments of moulding from St. Andrew's is a row of palmettes, surrounded by beading, and linked by ties (Fig. 16). The design, and its execution, is similar to that on the fonts of Paulerspury (Fig. 15), Dodford, Tiffeld, Weedon Lois, and Maids' Moreton. The fragments from St. Andrew's, however, are small, and the linked palmette motif is not uncommon in English twelfth-century carving, so that the relationship with the decoration of the fonts may possibly be only coincidental.

Nevertheless, the combination of the evidence we have reviewed supports, if it does not prove, the connection between our workshop and the priory. It has been seen that the church of St. Peter, certainly by the end of the twelfth century, was in the possession of St. Andrew's. St. Andrew's was an important ecclesiastical centre, and one which was likely to have lavished a considerable amount of sculpture upon its own buildings. The grandiloquent treatment of the decoration of St. Peter's recalled that of a much larger church. It is not unlikely that the masons of our workshop were influenced by the sculpture at the priory, if they did not actually work there.

The Sources of the Sculpture

The masons of the workshop in Northampton drew upon two principal sources for their art. The more remote,

and the more novel, was Northern Italy. This region provided the craftsmen with new models for architecture as well as sculpture. The greater debt, however, was to Anglo-Saxon art. For the dependence of the workshop on older native traditions took both a direct and an indirect form.

An acknowledged feature of late Anglo-Saxon architectural sculpture is its close relationship to manuscript painting. It is probable that the designs were transmitted from the one medium to the other by means of pattern books. The capitals of the chancel arch at Bibury in Gloucestershire, for example, reproduce the acanthus leaves of borders in manuscripts of the Winchester school.²³ The same can be said of the capitals of the tower piers and west doorway of the church at Milborne Port, in Somerset. The mid-eleventh century slab with the harrowing of Hell in Bristol Cathedral recalls, with its fluttering drapery, and flat, linear execution, the contemporary illuminator's page.

After the conquest, the influence of manuscript painting continued to be strong in English Romanesque sculpture. In the crypt at Canterbury Cathedral there are capitals, carved before 1130, which reproduce motifs from Canterbury manuscripts.²⁴ Many of the carvings at St. Peter's display a similar connection with contemporary manuscript illumination. For example, the foliage pattern on the capital illustrated in Figure 6, with its use of the three leaved, so called "Byzantine blossom," has a close parallel in a mid-twelfth century Canterbury manuscript, the Eadwine Psalter, of which folio 200v. is shown in figure 17.²⁵ The design of the foliate initial "C" of "Confitebor" is almost exactly the same as that cut on the stone of the capital.

Some of the animals featured in the Northampton carvings also ultimately derive from English manuscript pages. A capital of the choir at St. Peter's shows four-footed beasts with beak shaped noses, nibbling at foliage (Fig. 18. Plan 1C). Very similar animals can be found on the fourth folio of a commentary on St. Matthew in Durham Cathedral Library (Fig. 19).²⁶

Dragons, of one kind or another, appear on four of the capitals at St. Peter's, and on the grave cover in that church. In their fondness for this creature the masons at Northampton echo its use as a common stock in trade by English twelfth-century book illuminators. One can compare the coiled dragon on one of the capitals in St.

Peter's (Plan 1C) with another on folio 91 of an early twelfth century *Moralia* of Gregory the Great, which belonged to Rochester Priory (Figs 7 and 20)²⁷. One of the dragons at St. Peter's may be derived from a bestiary illustration. On the abacus of a capital in the choir, a dragon is shown in combat with a curious animal which is possibly to be identified, by his curling trunk, as an elephant (Fig. 21. Plan 6B). According to the bestiaries the dragon was the greatest foe of this beast, and in twelfth-century English examples of the book the two creatures were often illustrated together.²⁸ The similarity of these capitals to manuscript illuminations would have been the more obvious when they retained their original paint. Close examination of the capitals reveals traces of red pigment on the backgrounds. The paint has survived because the carvings were formerly protected by plaster.

The carvers of our workshop were faithful to the traditions of late Anglo-Saxon sculpture not only indirectly, in their general reliance on painted models: they went so far as to re-use Anglo-Saxon motifs, giving to their work a somewhat anachronistic aspect. An example of this is the use of shaft rings around the circular piers

of the arcades of St. Peter's church (Fig. 2). The motif here is of local Anglo-Saxon origin. It was frequently employed by pre-conquest masons for the decoration of baluster shafts. It appears, for example, on the shafts of the upper openings of the late Saxon tower of the church at Earls Barton, seven miles from Northampton. At Brixworth, also near Northampton, the balusters of the opening from the tower to the nave have tripled shaft rings, which are reminiscent of the tripled rings at St. Peter's. A font at the village of Little Billing, three miles to the east of Northampton, is also decorated with a triple ring, which is carved just beneath the bowl. In addition, the font bears an inscription, which informs us of the name of the carver:

WIGBERHTUS ARTIFEX ATQ. CEMENTARIUS
HUNC FABRICAVIT/QUISQUIS SUUM VENIT
MERGERE CORPUS PROCUL DUBIO CAPIT

The date of this font cannot accurately be determined, but it is probably post-conquest. This is suggested by the characters of the inscription, which conform closely to those used on seals of William the First.²⁹ Wigberhtus may



FIGURE 18. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 1C.*

provide us with an example of a country mason who continued, after the conquest, to carve in the old Anglo-Saxon manner. There must have been others like him. It was probably through the work of these rustic sculptors that the pre-conquest traditions were kept alive until the twelfth century, when the decoration of St. Peter's was carried out.

Another aspect of the work of the Northampton masons which reflects the traditions of pre-conquest art is their treatment of interlace designs. The font at Mears Ashby, for example, has narrow bands of interlace framing the roundels on each of its seven decorated sides. The patterns, and the flat recessed rendering, compare with many examples of Anglo-Saxon stone cutting. One design which appears on this font consists of an alternating series of interlocking lozenges and loops. It can be seen on the left hand of the two facets of the font illustrated in Figure 11. The same pattern is carved on a fragment of a cross shaft from Ramsbury, Wiltshire.³⁰ It also appears on a pre-conquest fragment which survives in the church of St. Peter itself. This stone, part of a cross shaft, was found during the nineteenth century restorations, underneath the Romanesque church. Its discovery in this position possibly indicates that there was, before the twelfth century building was erected, an Anglo-Saxon church on the same site.³¹

At the Northamptonshire church of St. Giles in Desborough there is another Anglo-Saxon cross shaft which is carved with a motif later employed by our workshop (Fig. 22).³² This design, which appears on two capitals in St. Peter's church, consists of two beasts placed back to back against an interlace ground (Fig. 4). The cross shaft at Desborough is somewhat worn, but the similarity between its beasts, and those on the capitals in St. Peter's, is still apparent. In both cases the animals bite at stems in front of them with wide open jaws. The tail of one of the Desborough beasts loops under its belly, as do those of the creatures at St. Peter's.

We have, then, been able to find considerable evidence of the survival of pre-conquest traditions in the art of our Northampton workshop. Its masons carved Anglo-Saxon motifs which had been in usage in Northamptonshire. This suggests that most of their number must have been local craftsmen. They were heirs to the legacy of a county which, to this day, is rich in Anglo-Saxon monuments.

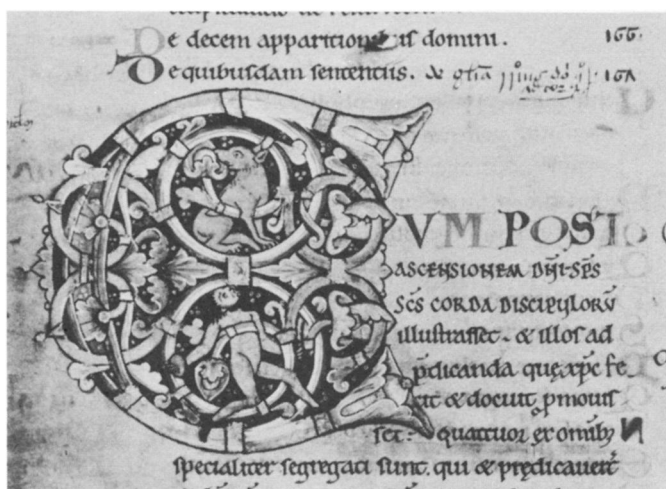


FIGURE 19. Durham Cathedral Library, Ms. A. I. 10, fol. 4.



FIGURE 20. London, Brit. Mus. Royal 6. C. VI, fol. 91.

One should now consider those elements in the Northampton carvings which are derived not from English, but from Italian sculpture. For these, we shall find the best extant parallels in the Lombard plain, and on its mountainous fringes.

Close parallels can be found in Italian churches for the wire-like coils that adorn many of the capitals and abaci at St. Peter's in Northampton. For example, one of the panels of the choir rail in the church of S. Giovanni at Pieve Trebbio, in Romagna, has a decoration of coils identical to that on a capital in the nave of St. Peter's (Figs. 23 and 3). In both cases the coils have a double strand, are tied, and are scattered in disorder across the surface of the stone. The choir rail of S. Giovanni was restored between 1897 and 1913, but, it is said, with the use of old fragments.³³ According to tradition, the church was dedicated in 1108 at the instigation of the countess Matilda. The dedication was recorded on an inscription of the facade, now lost.

The same twin stranded, wire-like coils can be found carved elsewhere in Northern Italy. They appear, for example, on a seemingly re-used lintel over the west door of S. Fè at Cavagnolo di Brusasco, about 20 miles east of Turin. They can also be found carved on one of the columns that carries the famous pulpit in the church on the island of S. Giulio in Lake Orta (Novara).

Other carvings by our workshop in Northamptonshire give evidence of the contact with Northern Italy. The four and eight-petalled flowers carved on the fonts at

Green's Norton and Dodford, for example, are very similar to those on a capital in the crypt of S. Savino at Piacenza (Figs. 14 and 24). The crypt was completed before the consecration of 1107.³⁴ In each case the flowers are enclosed by square frames, and have round projecting centres. Similar flowers feature in the decoration of the church of S. Michele at Pavia.³⁵

Several of the abaci of the capitals in St. Peter's church are carved with four footed animals or dragons. This feature is not unknown elsewhere in English architectural decoration, and at St. Peter's the actual designs, as we have seen, may have been derived from English manuscripts. But abaci decorated with beasts and dragons are also to be found at S. Michele in Pavia (Fig. 25), and at S. Savino in Piacenza. It is very possible that in their



FIGURE 21. *St. Peter's Church, Capital, 6B.*



FIGURE 22. *Desborough, St. Giles, Cross Shaft.*



FIGURE 23. *Pieve Trebbio, S. Giovanni, Choir Rail.*

choice of such animal motifs for these members, the Northampton masons were influenced by Italian examples.

Italian influence is to be seen in the architecture of St. Peter's church as well as in its sculpture. This is most clearly apparent in the polychromatic masonry of the west tower (Fig. 9). Although this tower has been reconstructed, alternating courses of light and dark stone probably existed in the twelfth century. For one can find many other examples of twelfth-century polychromy of this kind in the country churches near Northampton. The late Romanesque west tower of St. Andrew's church at Spratton, some seven miles north of Northampton, has a west doorway whose arch is constructed of alternating light and dark voussoirs (Fig. 26). Three village churches in the vicinity of Northampton preserve traces of twelfth century polychromatic masonry in the construction of their nave piers. These are St. Mary's at Burton Latimer, some twelve miles north-east of the town, and the churches of Brafield on the Green, and Great Billing, both within a few miles of Northampton.³⁶

Although the finest Italian examples of Romanesque polychromatic masonry are in Tuscany, the technique was employed also further to the north, particularly at Verona, and around Lake Como. Since the closest parallels to the sculptures at Northampton are in Northern Italy, it was perhaps also from the northern churches that the English masons derived their taste for architectural polychromy. Over the choir windows of S. Abbondio in Como, for example, which are dated before 1095, one can find light and dark voussoirs set in alternation.³⁷ These are reminiscent of the voussoirs over the west door of the church at Spratton (Figs. 26 and 27). The carved decoration, also, of S. Abbondio is echoed in Northamptonshire. Strings of crisply cut knots were employed as ornament around the choir and apse windows of the church in Como, just as over the former west door of St. Peter's in Northampton (Figs. 9 and 27).

It could, however, be said that the west tower of St. Peter's, even with its Italianate polychromy, reflects pre-conquest English tastes. The late Anglo-Saxon west towers of the churches at Barnack and Earls Barton in

Northamptonshire are both notable for an entirely unarchitectonic decoration of pilaster strips. If the twelfth century English masons retained any appreciation for surface ornament of this kind, they must have found the Italian polychromy particularly attractive.

Another architectural element that the church of St. Peter may owe to Italy is its plan. There is almost no division between the nave and the chancel. None is visible on the outside, and on the inside only the cessation of the alternating system of supports hints at the distinction. This feature is unusual for England. Instead, it brings to mind the Early Christian basilica, and its Italian Romanesque successors (Fig. 1).

Thus the architecture of St. Peter's church confirms the conclusion suggested by the sculptures. The masons, while being in some respects faithful to native tradition, had come under the influence of Italian models.

The contact with Italy is confirmed by other twelfth century sculptures in Northamptonshire, which are not, however, to be assigned to the group of masons which worked on St. Peter's. In St. Margaret's church at Crick, for example, twelve miles north west of Northampton, there is a font which is carried by three kneeling figures.³⁸ In St. Michael's at Sutton, in the north east corner of the county, a recumbent stone lion is preserved which, to judge from the shape of its back, originally carried a column. The use of lions and of caryatid figures as supports was common in Italian Romanesque sculpture.

Evidence for Dating.

There is no documentary evidence which bears directly upon the date of the products of the Northampton workshop. We have seen that the first reference to St. Peter's concerns the institution of a rector by the deputies of Bishop Hugh of Lincoln, who held office between 1186 and 1200. At this time the rectorship had already been held by at least one other incumbent, John, son of Ranulph, who had died while in tenure.³⁹ The church, then, seems to have been in use well before the end of the twelfth century.

For a closer dating, we have to resort to the more tenuous evidence provided by stylistic parallels.

The most relevant English sculptures are the cloister doorways of Ely Cathedral. Like the Northampton carvings they show the influence of Pavian churches, as

well as that of twelfth-century English manuscripts. The Ely sculptures probably date to the fourth decade of the twelfth century, although here again firm documentary evidence is lacking.⁴⁰

The manuscript which provides the closest parallels to the foliage carved by our workshop is the Eadwine Psalter (Figs. 6 and 17). This can be surely dated between 1130 and 1170 through its calendar. In addition, a description of a comet which appears on the lower margin of folio 10 of the manuscript makes it likely that it was written around the year 1147.⁴¹

Stylistic parallels, then, suggest that St. Peter's at Northampton was decorated at some time between 1140 and 1150. If this date is correct, it is tempting to connect the construction of St. Peter's with the second Earl of Northampton. Simon II had succeeded to the earldom by 1141, and he died in 1153. Like his father, he was a great benefactor of the church. Simon I was responsible for the foundation of St. Andrew's priory, and probably for the building of the round church of the Holy Sepulchre in Northampton. His son is known to have founded the abbeys of Sawtrey and Delapre, and he was a donor to Croyland abbey.⁴² It may well be to his generosity that the extraordinary richness of St. Peter's church is due.

It seems, then, that the carvings of the workshop in Northampton were made towards the middle of the twelfth century. However, it was the Anglo-Saxon heritage that provided the masons both with their general attitudes towards architectural sculpture, and with some of their specific motifs. This local standpoint on the part of the masons becomes the more remarkable when it is realized that they also had some knowledge of twelfth-century Italian sculpture. The sculptors of Northampton incorporated Italian motifs into a strongly traditional repertoire. Their art was enriched, but not transformed, in the process.

NOTES

1. G. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture*, London, 1953, pp. 18-19. I am greatly indebted to Professor Zarnecki for advice on the preparation of this paper.

2. W. R. D. Adkins R. M. Serjeantson (ed.), *Victoria County Histories, Northamptonshire*, 1902-37, III, p. 41.

3. R. M. Serjeantson, *History of the Church of St. Peter, Northampton*, Northampton, 1904, p. 66. Only a few of the capitals were restored in the nineteenth century. The clerestory capitals marked on the plan as Nos. 11, 15, and 16 are entirely new. The capital on the western face of pier No. 8 is partially restored. The left half was carved in the nineteenth century to match the right half (Fig. 4). Presumably the left hand portion of the capital had been damaged by the choir screen. The volutes of several capitals in the nave seem to have been recut. The remaining sculpture, however, is intact.

4. Serjeantson, *History of the Church of St. Peter*, p. 262. Sir Gilbert Scott, who was responsible for the restoration of 1851, was informed by a grave digger that old foundations lay to the west of the present tower. Fragments of the capitals from the missing arcades can still be seen in the south aisle of the church.

5. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture*, p. 54.

6. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture*, pp. 18f.

7. J. Britton, *Chronological History*, London, 1819.

8. The capital is carved only on two sides. It is approximately



FIGURE 24. *S. Savino, Piacenza, Crypt, Capital.*

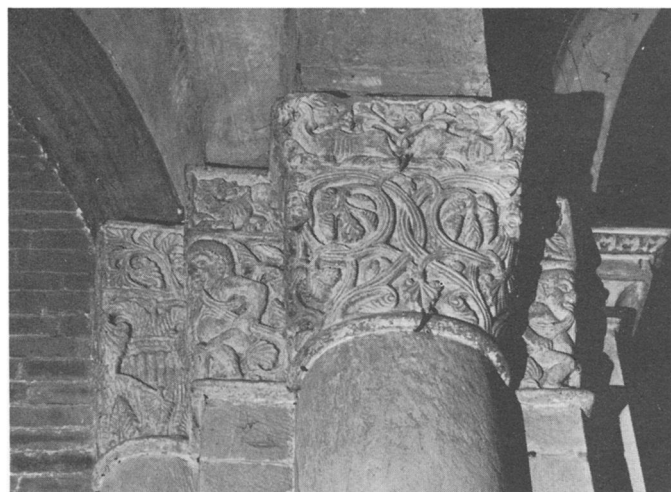


FIGURE 25. *S. Michele, Pavia, Capital.*

9" high and 10" wide at the top.

9. Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture*, p. 19.

10. *Loc. cit.*

11. *Loc. cit.*

12. There are six capitals in the church of St. Chad, at Stafford, which are almost identical to examples in St. Peter's, at Northampton. They are, however, nineteenth century copies. Two adorn the doorway of the west front of St. Chad's, a creation for which Sir Gilbert Scott was entirely responsible. The remaining four are on the eastern arch of the nave. A pamphlet reporting on the removal of the plaster coating from this arch, and on its subsequent restoration, was published in 1860. It records that the restorers discovered that the original Norman sculptures of the arch had been "lamentably abused," though "a few of the heads on the south jamb of the arch, which had for ages been protected from wanton injury by the ancient pulpit, were found in a perfect state." Examination of this portion of the chancel arch reveals four heads whose decayed surface contrasts with the crisp finish of the other sculptures on the archway. It is probable that these four heads are all that remain of the original sculptures of the arch, and that the sharper work, which includes the capitals, belongs to the nineteenth century.

13. *The Buildings of England, Northamptonshire*, Harmondsworth, 1961, p. 312.

14. Pevsner, *Northamptonshire*, p. 312.

15. V. C. H., *Northamptonshire*, III, pp. 33f.



FIGURE 26. *Spratton, West Door.*



FIGURE 27. *S. Abbondio, Como, Choir Window.*

16. They may now be seen in the storeroom of the Northampton Museum.
17. V. C. H., *Northamptonshire*, I, p. 293.
18. V. C. H., *Northamptonshire*, II, pp. 102f.
19. Serjeantson, *History of the Church of St. Peter*, 13.
20. V. C. H., *Northamptonshire*, IV, p. 132.
21. V. C. H., *Northamptonshire*, II, pp. 102f.
22. These pieces are now kept in the storeroom of the Northampton museum.
23. G. Zarnecki "The Winchester Acanthus in Romanesque Sculpture," *Walraf-Richartz Jahrbuch*, 17, 1955, pp. 211f.
24. T. S. R. Boase, *Oxford History of English Art, 1100-1216*, 1953, p. 31f.
25. Cambridge, Trinity College, Ms. R. 17.1.
26. Durham Cathedral Library, Ms. A. I. 10.
27. British Museum, Royal Ms. 6. C. VI. G. F. Warner and J. P. Gilson, *Catalogue of Western Manuscripts in the Royal and King's Collections*, London, 1921, I, p. 145.
28. e.g. Bodleian, Laud. Misc. 247, fol. 163v. G. C. Druce, "The Elephant in Mediaeval Legend and Art," *Archaeological Journal*, LXXVI, 1919, pp. 1-73. F. McCullough, *Mediaeval Latin and French Bestiaries* (University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages, 33) 1960, pp. 115f.
29. F. A. Paley, *Baptismal Fonts*, London, 1844, p. 34.
30. T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, London, 1938, p. 211, pl. 99.
31. Serjeantson, *History of the Church of St. Peter*, p. 12.
32. T. D. Kendrick, *Late Saxon and Viking Art*, London, 1949, pp. 79f.

33. A. Kingsley Porter, *Lombard Architecture*, New Haven, 1917, III, pp. 281f.
34. Porter, *Lombard Architecture*, III, pp. 26of.
35. A. Peroni, *San Michele di Pavia*, Milan, 1967, figs. 99, 124, 156.
36. Another partly Norman Northamptonshire church which preserves polychromatic masonry in its tower is that of the Holy Trinity at Rothwell. The tower, however, has been extensively reconstructed at various periods, so that the original disposition of the polychromatic courses, which have been moved, remains in doubt.
37. F. de Dartein, *Étude sur l'architecture lombarde*, Paris, 1865-82, p. 323, pl. 77-8.
38. The kneeling figures are not, however, of one piece with the bowl, and may possibly have come from elsewhere.
39. Serjeantson, *History of the Church of St. Peter*, p. 12.
40. G. Zarnecki, *Early Sculpture of Ely Cathedral*, London, 1958, pp. 16 and 36.
41. C. R. D. Dodwell, *The Canterbury School of Illumination*, Cambridge, 1954, pp. 41f.
42. R. M. Serjeantson, "The Origin and History of the de Senlis Family," *Associated Architectural Societies. Reports*, 31, 1911-12, pp. 515f.

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