

CHAPTER IX

REGIONAL DISTINCTION AND PROBLEMS OF DATING

In earlier chapters discussions of form and ornament have demonstrated that there are distinctive features in the sculptures of this region, as well as some similarities to the monuments in eastern Wessex and western Mercia, but the distribution of the evidence is, as has been remarked several times in these introductory chapters, thinly spread, with notable gaps at centres which judging by historical sources were clearly important and potentially influential.

As elsewhere in the British Isles, it is difficult to date the sculpture from stylistic evidence alone, but a broad historical context provides some hints as to which contacts might have been possible in order to have influenced the fashions for ornament and iconography of the sculptures. Nevertheless, throughout the text, the dates which have been tentatively assigned to the sculptures have been based on the assumptions that it is possible to compare the repertoire of ornament in the better-dated manuscripts and metalwork with that of the sculptures, and that there are period fashions. This, however, has to be set against what is known of the distinctive history of the region, individual sites, and individual patronage.

In western Wessex there is not the convenient chronological watershed of Viking-age conquest and settlement, with the changes of fashion that this produced, as in more northerly kingdoms. But there is a fundamental change in ornamental and liturgical taste from the tenth century, which affects all media and which is plausibly related to royal patronage of the Benedictine reforms of regular religious life and the close relationships of clerics and the West Saxon royal family with the Continent. The new fashions for acanthine ornament and figure sculptures provide a rough *terminus post quem* for dating, although the sequence through the tenth and early eleventh centuries cannot be precisely charted. In short the 'ideal state' as proposed by Phil Sidebottom cannot be adhered to throughout the history of Wessex sculpture: 'Any theory of stylistic evolution should include fundamental reference points before it can be accepted as a framework (even a rough one) for dating purposes. There should be a chronological start (and end) point

where one sculpture, or group of sculptures, are demonstrably the earliest (and latest) and are datable by independent means' (Sidebottom 2000, 215). It is difficult to identify what the 'independent means' might be since neither inscriptions nor context seem to provide them. The following discussion provides a rough sequence, and evidence for concurrent fashions of ornament for the western Wessex monuments.

Even within this relatively narrow frame there are regional differences which are apparent from the beginning to the end of the period under review. The survival of the British Church in Devon and parts of Somerset and Dorset into the later seventh century, and the proximity to Wales and Ireland, seem initially to have encouraged a westward orientation in those counties, which persisted even after the Anglo-Saxon conquest. The more recently converted Anglo-Saxons swiftly followed up their victories however by the foundation of monasteries and churches, sometimes apparently in centres which had belonged to the British Church. The monuments of Wiltshire often differed from the rest, and this may be explained not only by the earlier evidence for Anglo-Saxon settlement and lay customs, but also by the fact that, until AD 909, it was part of the diocese of Winchester whilst the other shires were served by Sherborne (see Chapter I). Its sculptures, particularly in the eighth to ninth centuries, reflect this distinction and demonstrate different influences from those in the western shires.

CONTEXT

The actual location of much of the sculpture does not provide us with useful evidence for its original function and dating, since most have been retrieved from secondary contexts such as church walls, and although crosses which are at church sites may be considered to have been originally erected there, we have no means of knowing whether they were erected in an existing churchyard, or inside a church, or whether they preceded any later building. Only in the case of a late cross, at Copplestone, can we say that it was used to mark a boundary (see also Chapter IV).

Stone crosses can reasonably be seen as indicating the importance of a site, and there may be a difference when single large-scale crosses are found at a site, and when there is a collection of different types and styles of monuments, as at Bath, Glastonbury, Keynsham, or Ramsbury, all of which are important and well-documented ecclesiastical sites. Theresa Hall has demonstrated for Dorset that 'The majority of Dorset minsters were founded at the centre of the large royal estates ... The exceptions were the minsters which were sited at the centre of the core estates of the episcopal see of Sherborne' (Hall 2000, 79).

GROUPINGS

Perhaps the context of patronage is the most significant factor for understanding the function and status of monuments. From the beginning, the early Church depended heavily on the support and patronage of rulers, and the early Christian kings of Wessex were linked to the wider world of the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the missions on the Continent. From the reign of Cenwalh through that of Ine there are well-recorded contacts and intermarriages between the Northumbrian and West Saxon royal houses (Yorke 1995, 57–8), and this period from the last quarter of the seventh century to the mid eighth was an era of outstanding artistic achievement for the Northumbrian church and its royal patrons, including the building of stone churches such as those at Hexham, Wearmouth and Jarrow, and the raising of stone crosses, recorded in *c.* 740 at Lindisfarne (Cramp 1984, 27). It is not inconceivable that these contacts encouraged similar work in western Wessex, although it is not until the reign of Ine (688–726) that there is evidence, both documentary and archaeological, for the construction of stone churches, the best recorded being at Glastonbury. The British churches and indeed many of the minor Anglo-Saxon churches were probably constructed of timber, or wattle and daub, like the *vetusta ecclesia* at Glastonbury, and there is also the possibility that they could have been built of dry stone. It is probably not surprising therefore that there is little early architectural sculpture in the western shires until the appearance of mortared stone buildings. The earliest appearance of architectural sculpture may thus reflect royal patronage and taste at these centres, whilst at others of lesser importance buildings would have been of wood, like those at Beckery near Glastonbury (Rahtz 1993, 118–24). It should be noted, however, that even churches with the royal patronage like that at Wilton are recorded as being of wood in the late tenth century (Gem 1991b, 828–9).

Like some of the architectural sculptures at Monkwearmouth, co. Durham (Cramp 1984, pls. 115, 616–17; 121, 656; 124, 681–3), there are carvings which reflect the Insular taste for geometric ornament, including key patterns, animal ornament and interlace, amongst the sculptures at Glastonbury and Bradford-on-Avon — both monastic sites. At Bradford it has been suggested that the slab (no. 5, Ills. 407–9), which in its layout and ornamental details finds many parallels in Insular metalwork, could have been either a door lining or, less likely, part of a shrine. At Glastonbury several of the fragments decorated with key patterns or creatures enmeshed in interlace could also have some architectural context, perhaps as wall panels. St Laurence's church at Bradford-on-Avon was later decorated with newly fashionable figural panels (no. 4a–b, Ills. 404–6), but it is noteworthy that at Glastonbury there appears to be an abiding taste for Insular ornament in the sculptures without the introduction of Continental fashions.

In contrast the only *in situ* architectural decoration — that of the north porticus opening at Britford, Wiltshire (Ills. 410–23) — demonstrates both in the small square panels and the long slabs lining the opening, a type of ornament which reflects not the metalwork and manuscript fashions of the Insular world but rather the religious imagery of Late Antiquity. The vine-scrolls and interlaces have been compared with Continental sculptures, but also with an illustration from the eighth-century Canterbury manuscript, the *Vespasian Psalter* (see Chapter VII - plant). The travels of the kings of Wessex to Rome in the seventh and eighth centuries (see Chapter I) could also, no doubt, have served as an inspiration for such highly decorated architecture and for the use of Roman bricks to emphasise the continuity with antiquity. It is noteworthy that Britford is a royal possession in the later Saxon period (Barlow 1962, 52).

A different picture, however, might have emerged if there were sculptures from important ecclesiastical centres such as Sherborne, Malmesbury or Wimborne. Neither is there surviving evidence for the elaborate tombs which are mentioned in the texts at, for example, Glastonbury (see Chapters V and VIII).

The British Church's legacy may not be very strong in this region, but both inscribed field monuments (pillar stones) and simple incised grave-markers survived, possibly as late as the ninth century in parts of Devon, southern Dorset and western Somerset (Fig. 4). Nevertheless there are early Anglo-Saxon references to crosses in Wessex (see Chapter V, p. 32) which indicate that these could serve a variety of purposes: as memorials of significant events such as the 'Bishop's stones' which marked the resting places of Aldhelm's body on its

last journey back to Sherborne in 709, or as *foa* for prayer on individual estates, as in the *Life* of Boniface), or as the founder monument in a churchyard or church. The memorials to Aldhelm obviously were of stone, but need not have been elaborately carved. The first reference which we have to carved monuments are the enigmatic 'pyramids' at Glastonbury, described as bearing individual figures and inscriptions, the latest date of which, if they refer to historic characters, would place the monuments in the eighth century (see pp. 32, 66). These monuments have often been compared with the Bewcastle cross upon which each figure is an individual icon with its explanatory inscription (Bailey and Cramp 1988, ills. 90, 94–6). Bewcastle is also reasonably dated to the early eighth century, and significantly seems, according to its inscriptions, to reflect both ecclesiastical and secular patronage as do the Glastonbury pyramids.

Unfortunately no such figures survive at Glastonbury — the solitary example of a 'figure' from that site being the bust probably of an angel on a lost cross-head (no. 12, Ill. 253). For the eighth/ninth century the only example in the region is the remarkable figure, identified in this volume as King David, which is carved on the shaft at Codford St Peter, Wiltshire (Ills. 425–6). The bold crisp carving of the figure is unique in Anglo-Saxon sculpture, but the palmette fronds and small triangular leaves on the side faces find parallels with Britford and Kelston; see below. Before leaving the pre-tenth-century figures however it is important to note that, as with eastern Wessex (see Tweddle *et al.* 1995), there are no surviving shafts with scenes from the life and miracles of Christ, such as exist in Northumbria or Mercia (Hawkes 2003, 367–8), and which could serve as preaching aids or liturgical foci, unless the fragment of a panel with what could be a miracle scene at Avebury, Wiltshire, could be part of a cross and of this date (Ill. 394).

In Wessex the cross itself seems to be sufficient to provide the devotional focus, and its ornamental enrichment serves like the decoration of the opening letters of manuscript chapters to enhance and add significance to the form. Plant-scroll motifs based on the vine and palmette at, for example, Codford St Peter, Kelston, East Stour, Gillingham and Keynsham, could have been deliberately chosen because of their biblical and liturgical associations (see Chapter VI, p. 55), whilst the palm tree at Cattistock could have been meant to invoke the Tree of Life (Ill. 45). Codford St Peter stands on its own not only for the combination of plant ornament with an outstanding figural panel but because the confidence and style of its cutting is the work of a master (Ills. 425–8). Elsewhere the plant forms are combined with fine, sharply cut, median-incised interlace,

which uses changing patterns and is typical of this area in its widely spaced turbulent knots and pointed terminals. East Stour and Gillingham (Ills. 57–64, 65) are distinguished from the rest by the clear vine-like berry bunches and could both be by the same hand, but Broad Chalke, Hanging Langford and Teffont Magna (Ills. 429–32, 452, 517–18) could also belong to this grouping which clusters mainly in south Wiltshire and north Dorset. This type of fine non-geometric interlace with elongated terminals is also found in eighth-century manuscripts such as the St Petersburg Bede or the Barberini Gospels with which they have been compared in the catalogue; and similar fine interlace — as well as rosette ornament, which is also paralleled in manuscripts — likewise occurs at Bath and Bradford-on-Avon on cross-shafts and cross-heads (Ills. 171–82, 397–403). The fashion could have begun in the eighth century and continued through the ninth. This is a loose grouping distinct from the 'Glastonbury' Hiberno-Saxon group with its key patterns and geometric interlace, but it is not possible to place the monuments in a firm chronological sequence — the groups could well have co-existed, and certainly some forms of animal ornament could well have been earlier.

THE LACERTINE ANIMAL GROUP

Distinctive lacertine animals with a variety of body patterning, which are mainly distributed in western Wessex (Fig. 19), have been seen as a group since the nineteenth century, and compared with manuscript art by Cottrill (1935), and others following him. They are discussed in detail in Chapter VI, p. 42, and engendered a lengthy discussion by Tweddle in Volume IV (Tweddle *et al.* 1995, 35–40), as well as forming the 'Colerne School' in Steven Plunkett's thesis (1984, I, 180–202). The question is: do they really constitute a 'school', any more than the various plant-scrolls? Animal ornament is a constant element in Anglo-Saxon art from the migration period to the Norman Conquest, but the nature of the animals and their disposition changes through time and in place. As noted in Chapter VI, none of the creatures on the crosses have the long-snouted heads which occur in Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts, or in metalwork as late as the later eighth century on the Coppergate helmet (Tweddle 1992). Instead the various forms of all the sculptured creatures are best paralleled in manuscripts such as the St Petersburg Gospels or the Barberini Gospels, both of which are dated to the eighth century. The problem is to know whether they are contemporary with the manuscripts or have been influenced later. A case has been made above that the taste for this animal

ornament began as a fashion related to styles in western Mercia, and this applies particularly to the Glastonbury beast (Ill. 228), but like Colerne in Wiltshire and Dolton in Devon (Ills. 433–5, 20–3), parallels can also be seen in southern English manuscripts of the later eighth century. The influence of Mercia in Wessex was particularly strong in the late eighth, early ninth century, but once established this form of animal ornament was developed and varied by the West Saxons, and seems to have remained popular throughout the ninth century. Accompanying the animal ornament on the Dolton shaft are panels with rows of figure-of-eight knots (Ills. 20, 22), which are also found on a shaft (no. 1) and recumbent monument (no. 4) at Ramsbury, Wiltshire, with very different leonine animals in roundels (Ills. 488–91, 503–5), which have been compared with Continental manuscripts. The Ramsbury 1 cross and the two grave-covers (nos. 4 and 5) can be ascribed to the ninth century by reason of their relationships to metalwork and manuscripts of that period (see Chapter VI, p. 50).

The combination of animal ornament and more geometric interlace patterns as opposed to the free-flowing interlace panels which occur with the plant-scrolls is a distinction worthy of note. A vestigial bush-scroll co-exists with lacertine animal ornament on the same monument at West Camel, Somerset (Ills. 346–8), but on the whole the early plant forms and ribbon animals are not found on the same monuments. Panels with these animals are usually combined with more formal interlace of pattern C or F types, or sometimes with animal-headed interlace.

There is a distinction also between the animals with canine or leonine heads seen either in profile or from above, and the purely serpentine creatures — the most complete examples of the latter being on Ramsbury 2/3 (Ills. 492, 495–7) — but less elaborate forms with simple herringbone patterning or cross-hatching are found on fragmentary pieces elsewhere, at Bradford-on-Avon, Frome, Keynsham, Rowberrow, Shaftesbury and Wells. At Colyton and Chew Stoke, however, such serpentine creatures are combined with an early form of acanthine ornament (Ills. 3–9, 200–3) which must take them into the tenth century. The suggestion then is that this type of patterned animal ornament was adopted in the late eighth century and co-existed with some of the early plant-scrolls as a popular decoration of shafts throughout the ninth century, possibly gaining a new currency at the time of the Viking wars through contact with Scandinavian art styles (see Chapter VI, p. 47). The latest form seems to have been the simple rounded serpentine shape decorated with herringbone or cross-hatching.

COLYTON AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS

The cross at Colyton in Devon (Ills. 3–9), which is one of the most complete in the region, is a pivotal monument in that its repertoire of ornament includes what may be seen to be the late type of ribbon animal, together with interlace panels of pattern F knots (such as are found on Ramsbury 1 and Dolton), combined with a running scroll inhabited with a bird and beast, but where the floral elements include acanthine ornament which can be closely compared with the plant forms on the side panels of the presentation portrait Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 183, and some of the Cuthbert embroideries (Fig. 22 and Chapter VI, p. 51). The large flat curling leaves and the fanciful leaf flowers are almost identical with those on a panel at Chew Stoke in Somerset, where there is also another panel with interlaced reptilian beasts (Ills. 200, 202). At the top and base of the Colyton cross are sprays of acanthus ornament which are nearer to the classical type, as well as domed clips which are another hallmark of the West Saxon floral ornament in sculptures of the tenth to eleventh century. Variations on the acanthus theme occur — from the sparse tree-scroll at Braunton, Devon (Ill. 1), to the lush paired leaves on shafts at Littleton Drew, Wiltshire (Ills. 455–8), or the Bath cross-head, no. 9 (Ill. 189), and the bold scrolls on the recumbent grave-covers at Bath and Wells (Ills. 183–5, 327). The distribution of this lush acanthine ornament is clearly centred in western Wessex (Fig. 21), and it becomes the dominant motif on all forms of sculpture other than wall panels (see below). But as noted in Chapter VI (pp. 54–5) there is as much variation in the patterns as there is in the acanthus ornament on what have been assumed to be contemporary manuscripts and metalwork. Whether one should consider, however, that manuscripts provided the models, and therefore the centres which produced the sculptures must have had access to such works; or whether one is to see this as a period fashion in which designs were adopted in a variety of media simultaneously, is a matter for debate. In other words, acanthine ornament may have been popularised though the dissemination of high quality gifts such as came to King Athelstan from the Continent (*Gesta Regum*, II.135; William of Malmesbury 1998, 217–21), but through which medium they reached the sculptors is uncertain.

FOLIAGE AND ITS CONTEXT

The relative wealth of manuscripts as opposed to sculpture which survives in Wessex almost inevitably leads one to seek comparisons for the sculptures in manuscripts, although the known context and close dating of the Cuthbert embroideries has given these a crucial role in any discussion of early tenth-century art. We have for example a model for the sort of transmission which could have occurred, in the record of St Dunstan creating designs for needlework (*Vita S. Dunstani, auctore B*, ch. 12: Stubbs 1874, 20). There is no doubt that decorative motifs were interchanged from one medium to another (see Fig. 22), and that there were period fashions which were based on the repeated choice of certain forms, motifs and organisation of ornament. As Gameson remarks, 'However, it is clear that the evolution of fashion depends on the visual awareness of artists and patrons and on the "peer" pressures to which both classes were subject in relation to the works of art they produced or commissioned. It relies on their favourable perception of certain motifs rather than others, and reflects the often imponderable aesthetic, social, political, religious, and other factors which encouraged then in their appreciation' (Gameson 1995, 124). He also makes the telling point that 'The decorative motifs and forms which reappear from object to object are only *closely comparable* or *similar* to each other when viewed in isolation ... when displayed within the same church they *matched* each other, a significant distinction' (*ibid.*, 125).

The variety and competence of carving of these foliage patterns in tenth- and eleventh-century Wessex does imply that several important centres were involved, probably working in a competitive manner, and these could have been based in the reformed monasteries or new episcopal centres in the region. The close involvement between the royal and noble families and the religious houses has been noted already, and the growth of a wider lay literacy and artistic patronage in the late Anglo-Saxon period means that any distinction between religious and lay taste and commission is an academic distinction. As has been often lamented in the past, we are woefully ignorant of workshop practice and training in late Saxon England, and the role of stone carvers is perhaps the most obscure of all crafts.

ICONIC FIGURES

Although the major rebuilding of churches occurred after the Conquest (see Gem 1991b, 835–6), there was some new building in the aftermath of the church reforms of the tenth century; and the more elaborate forms of the liturgy as practised at major centres encouraged the development of stational foci within churches which must often have been marked by sculptures, and the surviving monuments demonstrate the increase in scale and importance these had in church interiors. The large-scale roods which were a feature of the sculptures in the Winchester diocese in eastern Wessex have been discussed in Volume IV (Tweddle *et al.* 1995, 73–9), and there are indications that they existed also in this region, in the vestige from Muchelney (Ills. 306–8) or the attendant angels from Bradford-on-Avon (Ills. 404–6); but other panels illustrate different scenes from the life of Christ — in his teaching role in the Virgin and Child compositions at Inglesham and Langridge (Ills. 453, 305), and in the great harrowing of Hell at Bristol (Ill. 198), or as Christ triumphant in the composition from Congresbury (Ills. 204–20). The importance of angels, which is apparent in the southern English manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh centuries, is also reflected in the solitary solemn angel from Winterbourne Steepleton (Ills. 149–52) and the panel representing St Michael slaying the dragon from Stinsford (Ill. 100). When painted, all of these panels must have made a dramatic impact: the smooth outline of the Inglesham Virgin must have been much enhanced by the addition of painted details of drapery, and the Langridge Virgin still bears copious evidence of red paint. These panels reflect a variety of styles of carving, and are clearly the remnants of what must have been flourishing 'schools', as diverse as those found in manuscript paintings of the period, but unfortunately they are an imperfect record.

Gameson sums up their impact: 'The physical presence of numerous such images impressed upon the beholder the fact that he was in the house of God. They reaffirmed the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith at every turn. They continuously underlined the multifaceted nature of the Deity. They reminded man that his every action was done in the sight of God' (1995, 134). The iconography of new forms such as the fonts at Wells (Ills. 328–45) and Melbury Bubb (Ills. 72–7) also reinforce this devotional role. There are of course lesser monuments carved by less accomplished workmen, such as the churchyard monuments from Shaftesbury (Ills. 92–5); and the granite crosses from Devon seem to be serving several purposes which combine the marking of territory with a prominent Christian statement.

With the emphasis placed by the Normans on architecture as a proclamation of wealth and status, the forms on which sculptural decoration was displayed changed radically in the later eleventh century. The tympanum and capitals at Knook demonstrate the new forms, but like the capitals at Milborne Port, the foliage, as is noted in the catalogue, has reminiscences of late Anglo-Saxon taste (pp. 191, 240, Ills. 556–65). This prolongation of the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic could be explained by the continued use of Anglo-Saxon masons, or by the fact that Anglo-Saxon metalwork and manuscripts in similar styles had already influenced Continental taste. Continental churchmen, like their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, valued metalwork and manuscripts highly.

Finally then, despite the fact that stone sculpture was not as prized by the Anglo-Saxons as work in other media, I do not think that we need to share David Wilson's despairing assessment of stone sculpture from Alfred to the Conquest: 'What survives is often of second- or even third-rate quality and, when compared with the courtly manuscripts and ivory carvings (even with the metalwork), can be seen as such' (Wilson 1984, 195). Sculpture is fulfilling other purposes and is more widely accessible to the generality of people; and the monuments of western Wessex, although not as numerous as those in some other kingdoms, can be seen as an important reflection of the devotion of their time.¹

1. This volume discusses a total of 239 stones from 114 separate locations. The main catalogue includes 175 pieces from 75 sites, with an additional 64 items in the appendices.