Alexander’s Frieze on Lincoln Minster

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During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the frieze on the Norman facade of Lincoln Minster was assumed to have been moved there from elsewhere, either because of a supposed Anglo-Saxon character in the carving or because of discrepancies in the setting. Subsequently Prior and Gardner have dated the sculpture after a fire in 1141, but without supporting argument, while Zamecki, in addition to clarifying the iconography and placing the sculpture in a rational stylistic perspective, has provided evidence that the slabs were made for their present location during the refurbishing of Remigius’s building by Alexander in the 1140s. The following observations deal with three points: firstly the carving of the slabs for their present position, secondly the strange order of the Old Testament scenes, and thirdly the date of the work and whether this might explain the oddities noted in the second question.

All arguments about the fit of the slabs have concerned themselves with their horizontal arrangement, that is, whether one panel or a group of panels was too long or too short for a particular location, and as there are significant discrepancies on this axis there has been much room for discussion. The height of the slabs, however, provides conclusive proof that they are where they were designed to be. All the panels, except for the fragment on the left buttress, fit between two full, that is unrecut, courses of stone, and as these courses belong to Remigius’s building, the distance between them must have been known before carving commenced (Pl. I and Fig. 1). The stringcourse above the frieze could arguably be an adjuster to accommodate the slabs to this measurement were it not for the fact that it is part of a course of uniform thickness running right across the facade, whether there is a length of stringcourse on it or not; consequently it is a feature of the eleventh century facade. The lack of a quirk between the upright and chamfered faces does not distinguish it in date from the other eleventh century stringcourses on the facade which have it, as the quirk appears in the choir aisles at Durham, and the plain and grooved types occur together in the eleventh century part of Chichester Cathedral.

The second question concerns the odd placing of the slab with Daniel in the lion’s den, and the two reliefs on the south face of the Cathedral now enclosed in the Ringers’ chapel, illustrating in one, three men clutching at trees and in the other a man slouched under a boat (Fig. 1, Plate II). Dr. Zamecki reconstitutes the latter as the right hand end of the scene of Noah building the Ark (Plate III) and suggests that the position of both and their unfinished state are due to their having been made 1.27 m too long for the space allotted them on the facade, so that they were replaced by the Daniel slab.

There are two objections to this explanation. First, an error of only a metre in a unit 5.11 metres long is unlikely even in a medieval workshop (Fig. 2). Secondly, the slab with the recumbent man cannot be reconstructed as a continuation of the building of the Ark for the following reasons. While the lines of the boat’s side in the

Plate I Lincoln Cathedral, the Norman part of the facade. M. Thurlby.
Fig. 1  Lincoln Cathedral facade; ashlar coursing at the level of the frieze. Not to scale; differences in height are exaggerated. My thanks are due to A. D. Johnson for drawing the figures.
Plate II  Ringers' Chapel, frieze.  M. Thursby.

Plate III  Reconstruction of Noah building the Ark, from Zarnecki, 1963, fig. 7b.
Plate IV  Building the Ark.  *M. Thurlby.*

Plate V  The Ark landing after the Flood.  *M. Thurlby.*
boat building scene (Plate IV) continue beyond the workman on the left, the two or three inches between Noah and the right-hand edge are blank, hence the planks were not intended to meet others on an adjacent slab to the right. The whole Ark represented in the scene to the right of the Daniel slab has its two ends clearly distinguished by the planks stopping at right angles to the central beam at one end and swooping up to a point at the other (Plate V). Both the section in the chapel and that in the scene of Noah building have planks meeting at a point, therefore it is unlikely they belong to the same boat. Finally the recumbent figure is incongruous in a scene of the building of the Ark, as if the man were indulging in a rest break. Dr. Zarnicki suggests he is a drowning man from the adjacent scene, but such an overlap would be unique at Lincoln, nor has he any stylistic or compositional contacts with the other three men. Further, Noah and the workman (Plate IV) form a symmetrical composition of the same type as all the two-figure scenes (Cain and Abel, Lamech and Tubalcain, and God and Noah twice), and most of the others (the Expulsion, Daniel, and landing of the Ark, Dives feasting, Abraham in Heaven, and two sets of three in the group of the Elect, the Harrowing of Hell and in the three scenes of Hell).\textsuperscript{5} Adding the other slab
destroys this and creates an area of little iconographic significance behind Noah, detracting from the centre of gravity.

The solution to this perplexing problem may lie in the absence of a representation of the Ark actually in the Flood. The scene to the right of Daniel is unclear. The animals may be boarding and the people may be praying (Plate V), but there is no suggestion of a flood, and the passengers could as easily be giving thanks and the animals disembarking. The section in the chapel could then be the right-hand end of the Ark in the waters of the Flood, with one or more of the less fortunate swirling about in the surrounding water. The enigmatic carving in the top right-hand corner (Plate VI) is not, as at first sight appears to be the case, a partial removal of background stone from around the form of a stern or rudder, or some other part of the boat, but rather a piece of carving from around which the background has not yet been removed. The individual, splayed lines may represent the tail feathers of a bird which Noah is about to release. Such an arrangement exists in the equivalent scene at St. Savin-sur-Gartempe, with drowning man, boat and bird in exactly the same relative positions (Fig. 3). It is also noteworthy that the mosaics at St. Mark’s in Venice to which Dr. Zannecki alludes (Plate VII) contain scenes of the Ark in the Flood with Noah releasing a bird.

The difference between the drowning man in the panel with the boat, soft, disjointed and pathetic, perhaps carved in low relief to suggest partial obscuring by water, and the stout-bodied trio to the right, organised, upright and fat, may be explained by different sources. The group have a Romanesque organisation like the illuminations in the Albani Psalter, while the recumbent man, despite - or because of - his lack of quality, looks as if he has a more representational background, just as the painting at St. Savin must have, or the mosaic at St. Mark’s, where many of the figures have the same jointless quality as the man at Lincoln.

The identification of this scene is related to how far it extends west behind the thirteenth century vault of the Ringers’ Chapel. The section of the façade lying south of the right-hand door (Fig. 2, A-B), has the same features as the equivalent part of the south face round the corner (B-C), so that calculating the covered space should be a straightforward matter. Unfortunately the western section is 5.11 m long and the southern only 4.87 m so that it is impossible to discover the width of the south-facing side (D-E) of the rebate at the corner. If D-E is assumed to be the same size as the west-facing side E-F, that is 1.25 m, then the space F-C will be 3.64 m. The slab with the three drowning men is 0.78 m wide and is separated from the right-hand edge of the section B-C by 0.99 m, leaving 2.46 m between the right edge of the scene with the Ark and the single drowning man and the left-hand edge of the section at F. The equivalent area on the façade, A-D, is 3.88 m long and is divided into 0.75 m for the scene of Noah and the workman, the same for Daniel plus 0.22 m for his frame, and 2.17 m for the scene of the Ark landing and Noah talking with the Lord. This suggests that the scene with the Ark and the drowning man is a complex one on the lines of its equivalent on the façade (2.46 m and 2.17 m), with sufficient room for a full representation of a boat surrounded by...
Plate VII  Venice, St. Marks, mosaic in narthex, the story of Noah, from Zamecki, 1965, fig. 9a.

drowning bodies. The combined length of such a reconstructed scene and that with the three drowning men is 3.24 m. Since the distance between Noah building the Ark and the right edge of the facade is 3.14 m the conclusion is nearly inescapable that the scenes in the Ringers’ Chapel were designed and correctly measured for the west front. Substituting the Daniel slab and the landing of the Ark necessitated the incorporation of a thick frame to accommodate carvings which did not exactly fit the space available. Not only do the two scenes from the chapel fit the space better, they are also iconographically more appropriate, since the reconstructed narrative sequence would be Noah building the Ark, the Ark in the Flood, the three drowning men, then beyond the corner Daniel in the lions’ den, perhaps as a parallel though hardly prophetic plucking from the jaws of death, and lastly the Ark landing and Noah talking to God. The present arrangement is doubtless due to the unfinished state of at least one of the two slabs in the Ringers’ Chapel, as well as the very inferior quality of their carving. It may have been considered more proper to complete the facade with finished pieces of a high standard and to relegate the others to a less prominent place, but the question then arises as to why the scene of the Flood was left unfinished to begin with. To this may be linked the scene of Dives in Hell (Plate VIII) where the snout of the Beast is carved in lower relief than the rest of the slab and has two ears of different character. The original slab may have had its right edge damaged before or during placing, necessitating a repair which looks as if it was carried out on the fabric itself.

The documents which supply the dates for Alexander’s programme also provide a possible reason for disruption of
work on the facade. There is some confusion over the date of the fire which necessitated the repairs, 1125, 1124, 1141 and 1145 all having been suggested. The Laud or Peterborough Chronicle of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records a fire on 19 of May, 1123, which destroyed ‘almost the whole borough of Lincoln’.11 The Annales de Ridel a Maren add ‘excepto monasterio et episcopio’ which is usually taken to mean the Cathedral and the bishop’s palace, though the terms are not unambiguous.12

The Annales date the event in 1122, along with the death of Ralph, Archbishop of Canterbury, whose death the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle also records under 1122. Thus either the Chronicle or the Annales have the date wrong, or the Annales have an extremely eccentric year for 1122-3.

In a chapter describing events thirty two years after the death of Remigius in 1092, Giraldua Cambrensis says that ‘...cathedralem beati virgini ecclesiam canam contigit igne sonsumi’, causing damage to Remigius’s tomb and the discovery of his uncorrupted body.13 Dimock, Giraldua’s editor, rejects the historicity of this fire because of a lack of corroborative evidence14 and the possibility that Giraldua or his source had confused it with the conflagration of 1123, a contention supported by the difference of one year already noted between the Annales de Maren and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. This however leaves unexplained how Remigius’s tomb suffered damage, unless one postulates another, minor, fire as Dimock does. Giraldua gives the above information in the section dealing with the posthumous miracles of the saint, covering chapters six to twenty. In chapter twenty two, a brief life of Bishop Alexander, he mentions a fire and Alexander’s repairs. The proximity of the two passages (six pages apart in the transcript, including footnotes) and the fact that the two fires are not distinguished, suggests Giraldua thought there was only one. In this he has been followed by most writers.

A fire in 1124 which burnt the Cathedral is noted in the 1806 edition of Camden’s Britannia, which appears to have taken it over from Essex who in turn got it from Willis. Arnold (editor of Henry of Huntingdon’s Historia Anglorum), suggests the same date for the relevant fire citing as his source An Account... of St. Mary at Lincoln, 1771, which no doubt got it from Giraldua.15 The relevant passage in the Historia Anglorum appears under the tenth year of Stephen’s reign, 1145 (Book 8, chapter 23) coming well after the Battle of Lincoln in the sixth, 1141 (Book 8, chapter 16). Lehman Brockhaus, in order to make this a reference to the fire of 1124, feels it necessary to reverse the order of the two passages, printing 8.16 as item 2350 and 8.23 as 2346.16 Arnold accepts the location in the 1140s of the reference to the repairs, but considers they extended from 1124 to 1146.17

The full text of 8.23 indicates that while the passage describing the restoration occurs under the tenth year of the reign,18 that is 1145, it follows immediately after Alexander’s return from Rome ‘sequenti anno’, that is 1146.19 Roger of Hoveden, telescoping Henry’s narrative, binds the return from Rome and the restoration more closely together.20 This has led to the dating of the relevant fire to 1145, for example by Precentor Venables in the Dictionary of National Biography, while Hill has it ‘shortly before 1146’.21 But the location of the paeony may be occasioned as much by literary reasons as a desire for chronological accuracy. Further, 1146 is not the terminus ante quem for the restoration, but rather 1154, the appearance of the fifth and last edition of the Historia, after the fourth of 1145.22

If one rejects Arnold’s twenty two year programme of repairs, then a fire in the late thirties or early forties becomes necessary to explain the position of the reference in Henry’s narrative. This the Chronicon Petroburgense.
conveniently provides under 1141. About Christmas 1140, in one of the turns of fortune in the civil war, Ranulf of Chester and his half-brother William took the keep at Lincoln, causing Stephen to besiege them there. Ranulf escaped and got help from Robert of Gloucester, the two defeating Stephen in the Battle of Lincoln on 2 February 1141, a large scale conflict which might have caused the conflagration in the Cathedral. In 1144 Stephen again besieged Lincoln without success. In 1145 and 1146 Alexander, as has been noted, was on the Continent. In the latter year Stephen regained the castle by ransoming Ranulf, and in 1147 defied superstition by entering the walls in full regalia; on the King’s departure Ranulf made an attack on the city but was driven off. In August of the same year Alexander again went to the Continent, where he caught a fever, dying on 20 of February 1148. The seven years following 1141 were thus exceedingly turbulent ones for Lincoln due to its involvement in the civil war, and busy ones for its bishop, both because of the part he played in this war, and because of sickness and travel, sufficient perhaps to cause disruption in the programme of repairs to the Minster, and hence the discrepancies in the arrangement of the slabs on the facade.

FOOTNOTES

3 Zarnocki, op. cit., 1965, pp.5-7.
4 Zarnocki, op. cit., 1965, pp.4-5.
5 They also parallel the arrangement in the related scene in the mosaics of San Marco, Venice.
6 James, op. cit., p.151, recognised a bird or birds in the top left-hand corner of this scene (PL VI) which might suggest a conflagration of the Ark in the Flood and the Ark arrived on dry land. However, close inspection of this damaged area reveals something more like an apotropaic dragon, possibly a mascot on the roof.
7 Jean Morris very kindly drew my attention to this parallel.
8 Zarnocki, op. cit., 1965, p.4, fig. 9a.
9 Compare the trees with those in Bodleian ms Ash. 2.6. f169 in T. Bous, English Art 1100-1216, (Oxford, 1953), Plate 50b.
10 A kind of Old Testament typology?

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17 ‘Eadem anno (1145) episcopus Lincolnensis Alexander, iterum Romam perganet, munificentissime ut prius habatur, ianua honorifice susceps est ab Eugenio papa novo, viro summa dignitatis condigno, cuius mens semper benigna . . . . Roddens autem sequenti anno cum summa ipsius pacis et totius urbis gratia, a suis cum summa reverentia et gaudio susceps est. Ecclesiastum vero sanctum, quae combustiones detrumpa fuerat, subtili artificio sic reformavit, ut pulchrior quam in ipsa novitate compararetur, nec ullius aedificis structurae inter se confuderet.

I would like to record my gratitude to Marjorie Brough for her help with the Latin passages.

18 Arnold, op. cit., p.25, ‘rebuid Lincoln Cathedral’ must be due to his ignoring this phrase.


22 Arnold, op. cit., pp. xi-xvi.

23 Op. cit. note 13. ‘Combusta est ecclesia Lincolniae. Fulco rex Jermyn oblit. Successit Baldwinus’. This is corroborated by the Chronicum Abbatiae de Parco Lude (edited by Lehmann Brockhaus, op. cit., note 16) and the Chronica Angliae Petropolitanae, ed. E. Giles, Caslon Society, (London, 1849), p.91, 1141: ‘Combusta est ecclesia Lincolniensis in festo Sancti Albanii. Fulco rex Jermyn, dux, principis regni, ipse et principatum in partibus, et picturae in ecclesia, et sanctorum in terris, crom woods, crom woods, astes, et aures effudit. Successit filius ejus Baldwinus III’. The graphic detail of this passage suggests that the CP is an abbreviation of the CAP, but about 1272 and the longer in the 1360’s. The CAP must therefore have incorporated sections which were already available to the CP for abbreviation. That the CP in any case the most reliable source is indicated by the fact that in the CAP the unfortunate Pope Celestine dies twice, both in 1142 and 1145, the second entry using the formula used in the CP under 1144, the correct date.


26 Henricus de Huntington, op. cit., 8.22-25; Obit Linæ, quoted by J. D. McFarlane, editor of Giraldus Cambrensis’ Vita Sancti Remigii, p.34, note.2.

The author wishes it to be known that this article was completed in 1970.

Book Review

THE MEDIEVAL CLAY-LAND VILLAGE

Excavations at Goltho and Barton Blount by Guy Beresford, xi + 106 pp., illus., The Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph Series No. 6, 1975, £4.50.

One of the most common landscape features of the East Midlands claylands were the extensive and often impressive earthwork remains of deserted or shrunklen medieval settlements and their field systems. Modern agricultural technology has enabled the heavy clayland soils to be cultivated effectively, thus bringing the land back to arable farming, but with the inevitable loss of some of these village sites. The Medieval Village Research Group urged that selected villages should be excavated in advance of destruction, particularly on the clays where so many sites were being lost, and where little meaningful excavation had been done in the past. The two sites selected in the East Midlands were Barton Blount in Derbyshire, and Goltho in Lincolnshire, and the results of the exercise are synthesised in this monograph by the excavator, Guy Beresford.

The sequence behind the startling results of these excavations lies in the size of the areas examined, and the speed at which work progressed. At Goltho, one whole and two part crofts were totally excavated, and at Barton Blount no less than three whole and two part crofts. In this way Guy Beresford was able to pick up the slight traces of the timber and cob buildings that were typical of the clays and to see how they related one to another. Not only was he able to record a most valuable series of individual house plans, but also to examine the development of complete crofts. In this way, he has been able to demonstrate that both buildings had a pattern of development, in house construction and in agricultural practice, which affected croft development. The constant comparisons between the two villages enabled him to paint a most credible picture of a clayland village which could not be done with the evidence from a single site.

Perhaps the most valuable product of the exercise has been the recovery of house plans, and the detailed analysis of their development on both sites. Goltho fared better, to the extent that more complete plans survived in the ground, and the buildings there are perhaps more convincing. On both sites, it is clear that the earliest buildings had earth-fast posts, but were replaced by structures founded on cill-beams on the surface of the ground. In turn, these were superceded by buildings footed on to post-pads. The author is content not to produce plans of each structure but also provides an excellent series of reconstructions, which while they might not have the approval of all building specialists, go a long way to illustrate the quality of peasant houses in the Lincolnshire claylands.

Many interesting features emerge, particularly amongst the later buildings. At Goltho there is the smithy in Croft A, and the farm with its barn and courtyard in Croft C—so similar to the farm in Croft E at Barton Blount, where, incidentally, the quality of the buildings is attested by the presence of a raw-pit.

As well as the plans of crofts and buildings, both sites, but particularly Goltho, produced a fine selection of pottery and metalwork finds which give some idea of the living standards on both sites. Ian Goodall’s study of the metalwork is most useful, and the pottery from both sites will be of considerable interest throughout the East Midlands.

The monograph is well conceived, with excellent illustrations and photographs, but it does have one or two shortcomings. Many of the plans are clearly simplified, with the result that evidence is withheld from the reader. A comparison of the Goltho Croft A excavation plan with its facing interpretation plan shows that a rebuilding of House 2 has been lost without trace, along with an alarming number of gullies and ‘unrelated’ post holes. While we have the plans of the houses, we now lack the pig sites and hen houses that made up a significant part of village life. The treatment of the finds reports is a little disappointing, especially in view of the quality of some of the objects. Although it is almost impossible to recover finds from firmly stratified contexts on clayland village sites, most finds could have been related to specific buildings, and the pottery particularly would have been of more value if presented in groups rather than as a purely typological collection. Within the pottery report, on pages 74-77, there is a problem of pagination where I suspect the editor has cut about the text to fit it around the illustrations with the result that it is very difficult to make much sense of these pages.

In spite of this, the monograph is a fitting conclusion to very two fine excavations, and will be of immense value to everyone working in medieval village or vernacular architectural studies, and Guy Beresford is to be congratulated on such an achievement.

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