

Early Sculptured Stone at West Camel Church, Somersetshire.

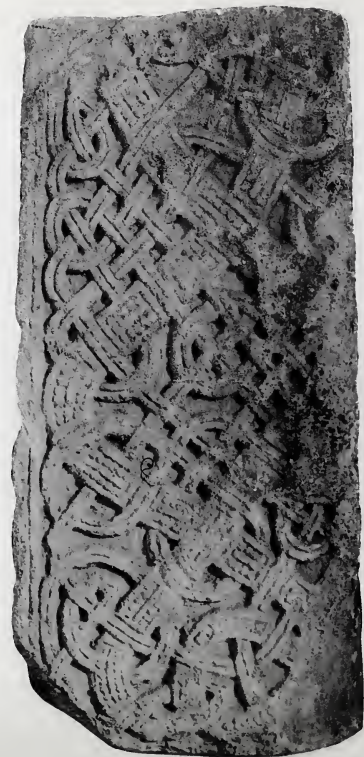
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THIS stone is described and figured by Mr. Pooley, in his *Old Crosses of Somerset* (Longmans, 1877), page 157. The photographs which have been sent to me by the Rev. J. A. Bennett, of South Cadbury, explain one or two points which Mr. Pooley's engravings leave in doubt. I may mention particularly the heads, mouths, and eyes, of the two serpent-like creatures on that side of the stone which is divided into two panels, none of which I had detected in the engraving.

The sculpture is very intricate in its design, and it is not so artistically disposed as to lead us to imagine that the designer was a master in his art. On the side which is covered with one continuous pattern, the curves of the bodies of the serpents are not good, and they do not cross symmetrically. But a remarkable amount of interlacement has been got into a comparatively small space, and as far as I can see the rule of alternate 'over and under' is never departed from, so that it is not a careless piece of work by any means. Taking it as a whole, I am inclined to think that when the shaft was complete, and sculptured on all four faces, it was as rich and elaborate a monument as any of which we have fragments or portions remaining, though a true sense of this beautiful kind of art was not present with the designer.

Mr. Pooley remarks that the interacements are so disposed



SCULPTURED STONE. WEST CAMEL.

in the oval space formed by the two bodies in the lower panel as to give the effect of a Greek cross in a vesica. The photograph does not shew that to my eye. But it is very interesting to note that on a pillar stone, or cross-shaft, in the crypt at Lastingham, where there are several pre-Norman treasures, one side is occupied by two serpents, head downwards, their bodies crossing and forming ovals as here, while their tails turn downwards at the top, and form one plain St. Andrew's cross in the upper vesica, there terminating. The artist has, in that case, emphasised the idea of a cross, by placing in the next vesica a plain Latin cross. The Lastingham shaft is a very simple sculpture as compared with this, for the tails terminate at the upper vesica after crossing once, instead of wandering over the whole face of the stone as here in intricate interlacements.

There is a stone at Rowberrow (Pooley, p. 8), which is covered by one serpent of this same character, its body fining off into a thin tail, which performs, by its convolutions, a long journey over all parts of the stone. Here again the interlacements are not artistically disposed, as they would have been at a good period of Anglian art in Northumbria; but they are invariably correct in the alternation of 'over and under.'

That there should be in Somersetshire two stones so closely resembling each other, which have come down from early times, is an indication of a local fashion or style of ecclesiastical art. And they no longer stand alone in the south-west. I send with this paper eight photographs, which shew the faces of two very remarkable stones—one at Dolton church in Devonshire, which must have been one of the most remarkable stones in the kingdom when it was whole, the other at Gloucester.

In looking at the Dolton photographs, it should be remembered that the upper of the two stones is upside down, the great sculptured shaft having been, at some time, broken into pieces, of which one was inverted and hollowed to make a font, and set on the other as a base. The east side shews two lacertine

creatures, forming an oval by their bodies crossing, as at West Camel, while their heads shew ears and rounded sides, and a sharp snout. The interlacements (of their tails I suppose) are very much better managed than at West Camel, the three triquetrae which occupy the three spaces left open by their necks and heads being as good as they could well be in conception, and fairly good in execution.

The Gloucester stone was found two or three years ago, when it became the subject of a good deal of discussion in *The Builder*. I have not heard where it was eventually placed for safety. It is a very rich piece of work, differing from that at West Camel in the creatures shewn, but otherwise of like character. On the side which I have marked *A*, the creatures are quadrupeds, the whole of one being shewn on the fragment, while immediately below the fore paws the head of another is seen. In the upper panel of *B*, the creature is a bird, and in the lower panel there are two lizards with legs and claws. In the upper panel of *C*, there is a creature like a griffin, with fore legs, and a body that fines off into an interlacing band, and in the lower panel are two such creatures, all but complete. *D* has only interlacing scrolls, springing off right and left from a central stem. The close resemblances which the general arrangement of this stone bears to that of the West Camel stone need not be pointed out.

The evidence has now become sufficiently strong for us to assert that in pre-Norman times—and, I think, not very late—there was a well defined and remarkable style of ecclesiastical art for lapidary purposes in the district in which these four stones lie. Let me here quote some remarks from my Disney Lectures, given in the University of Cambridge in 1888 and 1889, bearing upon early art in Wessex. My lectures are not yet published.

“In Wessex we have evidence from the first commencement of Christianity of a special connection with that part of Italy in which we find so much sculptured interlacement on marble

slabs of kin with our earliest Christian art in England—I mean Lombardy. You all know that the West Saxons were not converted by or through the Augustinian mission, but by a separate mission, by the ministry of Birinus. This Birinus was consecrated Bishop at Genoa, by the Pope's advice, in 634; not, as is usually said, by the Bishop of Genoa, but by the Archbishop of Milan, who at that time was living in the city of his southernmost suffragan, at Genoa. Birinus, then, with this Lombardic connection, baptised the King of Wessex at the Oxford Dorchester in 635, our Northumbrian Oswald being by chance at the Court at the time, fetching his bride, the King's daughter.

“I do not see why we should have any hesitation in supposing that a man like Birinus, treated with special favour at the King's Court, would naturally establish at once a certain amount of religious pomp and apparatus; and that it would be like in style to that to which he had been accustomed in his Italian home, presumably with some blending of the kind of ornament which he found in popular acceptance among his new flock. Indeed, we should be surprised if we learned that he took any other course than this. Thus, without saying that we have in Wessex any actual work done under the order of Birinus, I think we may fairly say that he would give the first impulse to Christian art there, that it naturally continued for some time at least on the lines on which he started it, and that those lines were such as I have indicated.

“But we have a significant hint that there may have been also a very different influence at work in Wessex. The West Saxon Kings had still a great deal of hard fighting to do after they became Christian, and it was not for nearly twenty years that they succeeded in dislodging the Britons from the forest land to their west, and occupying up to the Severn. It was the battle of Bradford-on-Avon, in 652, which gave them this additional territory, and it was almost immediately entered upon by one Meildulf, who founded the Monastery of Mellun,

or Malmesbury. And this Meildulf was what we should call an Irish monk. Thus we should not be surprised if in some of the earliest decorative work to be found in the dependencies of Malmesbury, there were signs of Hibernian influence.

“Meildulf, as you know, was succeeded as Abbot of Malmesbury by a relative of the West Saxon Kings, Ealdhelm, who made such a mark on the studies and the buildings of the West as it was the lot of few to make in any part of England. He built at once, besides the church or churches at Malmesbury, the well known churches of Bradford-on-Avon, Frome, Sherborne, and Wareham; superior, as Mr. Green says, quoting Mr. Freeman, to the famous churches Benet Biscop was rearing at this time by the Wear: not superior, the Northumbrian may rejoin, to the churches which Wilfrith was then rearing at Ripon and Hexham. Mr. Green adds that Malmesbury and Sherborne were the only churches of that very early time—meaning, no doubt, the only large and important churches—which the Norman architects spared when the great rebuilding set in.

“We have two interesting notices of the taste of Ealdhelm for artistic decoration, and in each case it is Italian art that is in question. The first concerns an ecclesiastical robe. Ealdhelm was visiting Rome as the guest of Pope Sergius I (687-701); he had sung the Mass, as was his daily custom; and in taking off his vestment [William of Malmesbury says, somewhat to my surprise, “the garment which they call a chasuble;” it would have seemed more natural to say “in taking off his chasuble”] thinking that the attendant was ready, he threw it off behind his back. The minister, however, was attending to something at another part of the altar, and was not there to receive the chasuble as it went back over Ealdhelm’s head. There was no one and nothing to catch it. But lo! a ray of the sun, shining clear through the transparent glass of a window, caught the chasuble and held it miraculously suspended in the empty air. “Now this vestment,” William

adds, "whether he had taken it with him from England or had only procured it for the occasion we do not know, is with us still—[he finished this work, by the way, the *Gesta Pontificum Anglorum*, in 1125]. "It is of most delicate material," he continues, "dyed scarlet; and has black scrolls containing the representations of peacocks." Its length shewed that the Saint was a tall man, and would naturally increase the difficulty of throwing it over his head. Here we have at once the birds in scrolls of which we have seen so much on Anglian stones, and are to see more in my sixth lecture on stones in Lombardy.

"The other is a case more in point. When Ealdhelm returned from Italy, he brought with him a white marble altar, a beautiful piece of stone, 4 ft. long, $2\frac{1}{4}$ ft. broad, $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft. thick, with a projecting rim, beautifully wrought all round with crosses. The animal which was carrying it up the Alps—which must have been a camel, William thinks, for no beast of our regions could carry such a weight,—the animal fell, and broke the marble slab in two. Ealdhelm, it is unnecessary to say, infused vigour into the animal, so that it picked itself up again, and he miraculously mended the altar, leaving only an irregular mark or cicatrice where the fracture had been. Ealdhelm eventually got the altar safe back to England, and gave it to Ina, King of the West Saxons, who bestowed it upon the church of St. Mary at Bruton in Somerset, where it was still to be seen in William's days, a lively proof, as he says, of the holiness of Ealdhelm. I suppose there was an irregular seam in the marble, as to the origin of which this story was told. [A letter asking the present incumbent (1889) whether they have any local tradition of the stone has not been fortunate enough to receive an answer.]

"As to the weight which the camel would have to carry, you will see that the dimensions I have given, 4 ft. by $2\frac{1}{4}$ ft. by $1\frac{1}{2}$ ft., mean $13\frac{1}{2}$ cubic feet. I asked a practical friend a week or two ago how many cubic feet of marble go to a ton, and he

replied "of statuary marble, 13½ ft." So the altar weighed just a ton.

"It is very interesting to find that the two points relating to Christian art which we are able to connect specially with Ealdhelm are scrolls with peacocks, and a slab of white marble sculptured all round with crosses. This pours a flood of light upon the character of the art of the time, both that in Italy and that introduced into England, and it seems to me to afford an almost startling justification of the claim I am in every lecture, in one form or another, putting forth—that we had these beautiful patterns in early England, and that they were using them at that time in Italy. The white marble altar, sculptured all round with crosses, given to Bruton church, is a description which, in itself, applies exactly to the altar of St. Satiro at Milan, of which I have spoken already, and am to speak in my sixth lecture. There is fortunately a third point connected with Christian art of the time, which William's life of Ealdhelm brings out, and it is for my purpose a very valuable point. When Ealdhelm died, he was at Doulting in Somerset, some 50 miles from Malmesbury. His body was brought with great pomp to be buried at Malmesbury, and at all the places where the body halted on the way—which was every seven miles—they put up, immediately after the burial was over, a stone cross, by order of the Bishop of Worcester, Ecgwin, who buried him. All of these crosses remained perfect in William's time, without any sign of decay in the 416 years which had elapsed. The last of the series of crosses was set in the cloisters of Malmesbury itself. They were called in William's time *Bisceptane*, Bishop's stones. In speaking of Ealdhelm's death, it is interesting to note that the two ecclesiastics whom we thus mainly associate with the introduction and spread of Christian artistic feeling and work, Wilfrith and Ealdhelm, died in the same year, 709.

"And we have not even yet exhausted the hints on early Christian art which we get from Ealdhelm's history. King

Ethelwulf, about 837, made a shrine for Ealdhelm's bones. On the front he placed images of solid silver. On the back he represented the miracles of the saint in raised metal work. Another account adds that the metal work was composed of sheets of gold. The inscription was in letters of gold, in a crystal pediment. We learn at a later period, in the Danish invasion in the next century, that the shrine was adorned with precious stones. We might almost think we were reading an account of the great altar of Wolvinus at Milan.

“A massive sculptured slab was found in some restorations of the parish church at Bradford-on-Avon, and has no doubt at one time been the reveal of a doorway. It is now placed, with two or three other stones, in the little Saxon church which stands over against the parish church, and which I should think the large majority of those who can form an opinion believe to be the *ecclesiola*, the little church, which Ealdhelm built here, besides the monastery and larger church, and of which William of Malmesbury says that it was dedicated to St. Laurence and stood in his time. This slab is exactly the right width for the doorway into the north porch, or out of the north porch into the nave; it is not wide enough for the thickness of the wall at the chancel arch. There is, however, no sign of any such stone being missing in either doorway in the north porch, nor in the doorway on the south side of the nave; so if it ever belonged to this “little church” it must, I think, have been in the doorway of the south porch, now destroyed. The proper conclusion, I think, is that it served as the reveal of a doorway in the original Saxon church of Ealdhem's monastery at Bradford, represented now by the parish church, in whose walls it was found, and had nothing to do with the *ecclesiola*.

“The interlacing pattern round the edge of the stone is simple, though I do not know it elsewhere. The sculptured slabs at St. Abbondio, Como, have several of them an interlacing border as this has. The pattern in the lower half of

the stone is, I believe, always considered to be intensely Irish; in the east of Scotland it occurs frequently on the so-called Pictish stones; I only remember one other example of it in England, and that is on the font at Deerhurst. The puzzle at Deerhurst is that you have this intensely Irish pattern enclosed within a border of classical scrolls, with flowers and fruit. Now if you look at the map, you will see that Deerhurst is on the Severn, about thirty miles to the north-west of Malmesbury, while Bradford is about twenty miles to the south of Malmesbury; and Bruton, to which Ina gave Ealdhelm's altar, is about twenty miles further still from Malmesbury. Thus the influence which gave Italian and Irish work to the district south of Malmesbury, may conceivably have extended across the border to a distance not so great. If that is not the explanation of the Deerhurst font, it remains a coincidence which demands an explanation, that the two examples on a considerable scale of this most un-English and un-Italian pattern, in combination, too, with Italian patterns, are found on either side of the great Wessex monastery of Ealdhelm, founded by an Irishman.

“The panel filled with Latin crosses is very pretty. It reminds one at once of the great page in the Durham Cassiodorus, written, as an entry in their early catalogue says, *manu Bedæ*, without authority and probably in error. There is a slab something like it at Clonmacnois. It reminds us, too, that Ealdhelm's altar was sculptured all round with crosses; and the altar of St. Satiro at Milan, from which place Ealdhelm probably got his altar, is covered with Greek crosses much as this slab is with Latin crosses.

“I mentioned that Ealdhelm died in Somersetshire, fifty miles from Malmesbury, and that crosses were put up at each seven miles, remaining complete to William of Malmesbury's time. Now Bradford-on-Avon is about $17\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Malmesbury on the map, on the main road into Somersetshire, and as the line is fairly direct, that will come to about 21 miles

by road. Thus we should expect that one of the crosses would come very near Bradford, at least; and considering the ecclesiastical importance of the place, we may, I think, fairly make sure that Bradford was one of the resting places of the Saint's body, and that a cross was set up there. We have at Bradford the fragments of an early cross, both shaft and head. There are curious complications in the work, simple as it looks at first. As a fact, I only know one other example of this kind of difficulty and this kind of pattern, and that is on two fragments of crosses now in the Bath Museum, brought there from some country church long ago. Thus here again we have the localization of types of which I have spoken, if we have nothing more."

In considering how the Christian art, which I suppose to have been originally Lombardic, changed its style, and became Dragoneseque, like a good deal of the Northumbrian art, we have a very interesting piece of evidence, I think, beyond dispute. William of Malmesbury, writing, say, about the year 1100, describes the antiquities of the great church of Glastonbury. He tells us especially of one of the Abbats, Tica, who had fled from Northumbria before the Danes, in 754, and brought with him relics of many of the Northumbrian saints, of Bishop Aidan, of Hild, of five Abbats of Wearmouth, and so on. Tica was eventually buried in a tomb which William describes as *arte celaturæ non ignobilis*, with an epitaph which he read, setting forth that his tomb was constructed with marvellous beauty; as though this Northumbrian Abbat Tica had been honoured with a tomb ornamented in the intricate Northumbrian manner, though the place of his burial was Glastonbury. William goes on to say that in the cemetery King Arthur and his wife were buried, between two pyramids or obelisks, and that Kenwin was buried with one pyramid; this last he describes in a later chapter as *nobiliter exsculpta*. And then he comes to this interesting statement:—I would gladly explain what almost no one knows anything

about, if I could but make out what is the meaning of those two pyramids which stand a few feet from the ancient church. The one which is the loftier and the nearer the church is 26 feet high and has five tiers, or tablets, or storeys—*tabulatus*. It is very ancient, but it has on it things which can be clearly read, though not clearly understood. On the upper tablet or storey is a representation—*imago*—in pontifical dress; on the next a representation—*imago*—with the pomp of a King, and certain letters. In the third there are names. In the fourth names. In the fifth and lowest an *imago*, and an inscription. The other pyramid is 18 feet high, and has four *tabulatus*, with inscriptions. I would not rashly say what these signify, but I suspect that the bones are contained within, in hollowed stones, of the persons whose names are inscribed on the outside.

Leland saw these pyramids or obelisks, which I suppose were tapering stone pillars or shafts, just such as those we have in Northumbria. They were greatly perished in his time, so that even with the aid of a magnifying glass he could barely make out enough to follow the description of William of Malmesbury. I have traced a portion of one of them down to the end of last century, but I fear it is now wholly lost.

The description of these obelisks is very much like some of the great Northumbrian pillars of the early Anglian period, and it seems not very unreasonable to suppose that the Abbat Tica, who had so great a reverence for relics, introduced this method of perpetuating the memory of those whose relics he very probably placed there, introducing at the same time the Northumbrian style of interlacing ornament, in place of such remains of Ealdhelm's style as may have survived in the district.

Mr. Bennett informs me that West Camel church was given in pre-Domesday times to Muchelney Abbey, and that Muchelney was founded probably by Athelstan in 939. It

may be in point to note that Athelstan ordered four stone crosses to be set up to mark the bounds of the Sanctuary of Beverley in Yorkshire, and these crosses are described as *nobiliter insculptæ*. Thus work of this kind was going on as late as Athelstan's time. The deficiencies in the designs of the West Camel stone are such as we should attribute to a period of stagnation or decay in artistic feeling, not to the rudeness of youth with a great future before it; and I should be inclined on a survey of all the circumstances to say that the shaft of which it has formed part may well have been designed and executed early in Athelstan's reign. I must leave those who wish to do so to suggest a special leaning towards Dragonese ornament on the part of the district whose men fought under the Dragon of Wessex.
