

THE GREAT ROOD OF GLASTONBURY ABBEY

JULIAN M. LUXFORD

It is commonly and plausibly supposed that every church in medieval England contained a monumental rood group, the essential elements of which were representations of Christ crucified, the Virgin Mary and St John the Evangelist. This ensemble, whether sculpted or painted, was typically situated over the screen marking the liturgical division between nave and chancel, although in large monastic churches it might be set over a screen one or two bays west of the *pulpitum* marking this division.¹ The largest and most opulent rood groups are likely to have been those of cathedral and wealthy conventual churches, although the surviving wooden base at Cullompton in Devon demonstrates that those of parish churches might be both large and dramatic.² After the high altar, the rood was the principal devotional focus of most churches and, visually, it was the most outstanding among many images. For the reformers of the mid 16th century, it was the most pernicious of all images,³ a status no doubt reflecting the esteem in which the majority held it. The violent reaction of female worshippers to the attempted destruction of the rood at St Nicholas's Priory, Exeter, in 1537,⁴ is indicative of its popular importance, not simply as a devotional image, but as the symbolic heart of Christian aspirations.

Not one English monumental rood group survives from the Middle Ages, and first hand illustrations of destroyed examples are very rare.⁵ Best known is probably that of one of Westminster Abbey's great rood groups represented in the third drawing of the mortuary roll of Abbot John Islip (1500-32).⁶ For the most part, we rely upon documentary accounts, surviving Continental examples, and a corpus of iconographically related indigenous material in other media (chiefly manuscript painting) for our picture of this once ubiquitous phenomenon. Thus, it is a matter of great interest to encounter a sketch of what is likely to have been one of the country's most impressive rood groups, that of Glastonbury Abbey (Fig. 1). This sketch, which occupies the lower left hand margin on page 198 of Cambridge, Trinity College MS. R. 5. 16 (hereafter R. 5. 16), was noticed by M.R. James in his catalogue of Trinity's manuscripts, but has been subsequently overlooked. James described it simply as 'a slight sketch of the rood, with Mary and John – that erected by Abbot Walter de Taunton'.⁷ R. 5. 16 contains a copy of John of Glastonbury's chronicle of the abbey, and James's attribution rests upon the fact that the sketch has been inserted next to the passage in the text describing the erection of a great rood under the auspices of that abbot:

'He constructed the pulpitum of the church with ten statues, and erected a large cross with images of the Crucified, Mary and John.' ('Hic construxit pulpitum ecclesie cum decem ymaginis et erexit magnam crucem cum ymaginibus crucifixo, Maria et Iohannes.')

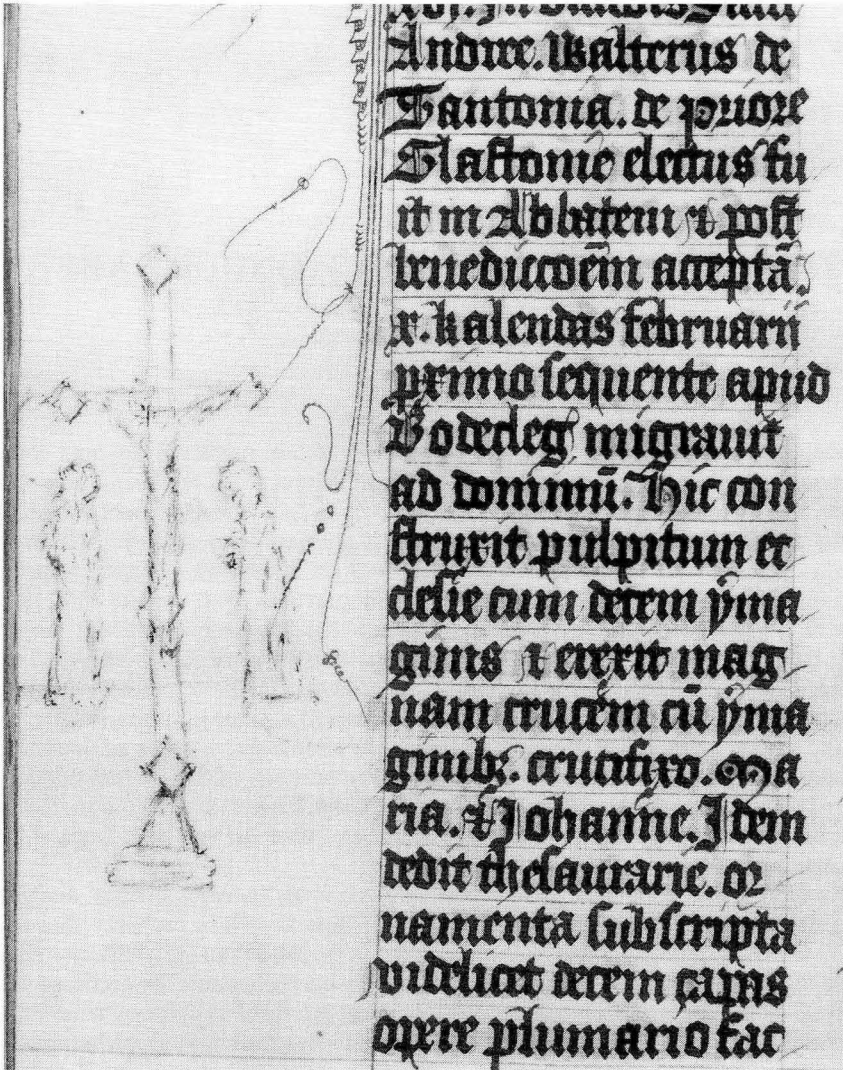


Fig. 1 Sketch in margin of Trinity College, Cambridge, MS. R.5.16, p. 198. Reproduced courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College. Shown at actual size

The identification is thus straightforward enough, but the sketch deserves more attention than James had opportunity to give it. This short note will offer a description and discussion of the sketch, beginning with some suggestions concerning its date, the status of its illustrator, and its intended function.

The date at which the R. 5. 16 copy of John of Glastonbury's chronicle was made is disputed, but this issue can be sidestepped here, as the sketch postdates the latest estimates. Indeed, there are firm grounds for placing the sketch in the first third of the 16th century. It is clearly by the same hand as the only other marginal illustrations in the manuscript, five small drawings of the shrine of St Dunstan.⁹ Three of these are accompanied by integral inscriptions datable paleographically to c. 1500–30.¹⁰ Although there is no marginal inscription accompanying the sketch of the rood group, the colour and tone of the ink are the same as for the illustrations of

the shrine. Moreover, all of the sketches are placed next to the passage of text describing the object they represent, demonstrating a unity of purpose, and suggesting thereby a common illustrator.

The sketch is very likely to have been executed by a monk of Glastonbury, and thus to be informed by direct observation. Although John of Glastonbury's chronicle was widely known (and perhaps widely owned) during the 15th and early 16th centuries, this particular copy has a Glastonbury provenance.¹¹ Moreover, the sketch is obviously not the work of an experienced illustrator. This said, it is clear that it was not a casual insertion. Beneath the figure of St John, the traces of an erased Latin cross and other marks can be seen, drawn in beforehand to show the illustrator where his sketch was to go. This deliberateness is tantalizing, particularly in view of the rudimentary nature of the sketch. Was the sketch originally intended to serve as the basis of a more comprehensively worked-up (perhaps coloured) representation, akin to (for example) the ink-tinted drawing of the Virgin and Child which appears in the late 14th century general cartulary of Malmesbury Abbey?¹² Who requested its insertion, on what authority, and why? As it stands, the sketch's principal function is that of a *maniculum*, indicating as it does the adjacent reference in the chronicle. But its inclusion may be attributable to some devotional motive. This would make it analogous to the devotional marginalia that appear in the 'Secretum Abbatis', the abbatial copy of Glastonbury's general cartulary and feodary.¹³ If we discount a pious motive, then it is difficult to understand why, of the vast number of works of art and architecture mentioned in the chronicle, the rood group should be singled out in this way.

The sketch measures 83mm high by 35mm wide. It is executed in a series of short, hesitant pen strokes, which evince neither confidence nor a developed understanding of linear values on the part of the illustrator. The rood is shown mounted upon a tapering base with a plinth moulded in three orders. The shaft of the cross is not straight, and the base relates to it very clumsily. The cross is of the standard Latin type, with lozenge-shaped terminations. By analogy with other examples of Crucifixion iconography, these lozenges are likely to have been intended for representations of the Evangelistic tetramorphs, or perhaps angels. The figure of Christ is indistinct, and imperfectly conceived in terms of its relation to the cross. The hands apparently extend into the lozenges at the ends of the transom, which is unlikely to have been the case where the great rood was concerned, as they would have obscured the iconography represented therein. There is evidently a *suppedaneum* (foot-block), or else another panel of lozenge shape, but the feet seem to descend below this. The head hangs to the right in the orthodox manner, but there is no indication of anatomical articulation generally; the knees and elbows appear quite rigid.

The figures of the Virgin Mary and St John are scarcely more clearly drawn. In neither case has much attempt been made to define limbs or facial features. Both figures stand upright, in profile, with heads slightly inclined. They are isocephalic and equidistant from the cross. In these particulars they conform to standard Crucifixion iconography. The face of the Virgin Mary has apparently been drawn twice, although individual features cannot be distinguished precisely. St John appears to have at least one arm folded in front of his chest, probably containing a book (the textual basis of the rood group being John 19:26–7). Both figures are cloaked, and vague lines drawn at their feet suggest shadows cast towards the viewer, although they may simply represent extensions of the draperies.

There is an apparent problem in the spatial relation of the figures of the Virgin Mary and St John to the rood itself. Rather than standing upon the same plane as the base of the cross, they are shown a good deal higher, indicating in three-dimensional terms a considerable recession. That the Virgin and St John should stand well behind the cross makes no sense in the context of Crucifixion iconography. However, we need not suppose the illustrator to have been at fault here. Although it is possible that he overestimated the height of the cross relative to that of the figures standing on either side of it, it may be that the arrangement shown reflects in a general

sense that of the great rood itself. Certain medieval English images of the Crucifixion show the Virgin Mary and St John standing in the same relation to the cross as they do in the marginal sketch of R. 5. 16. The implied spatial inconsistency is resolved by having them stand upon little mounds, or else upon *rinceaux* scrolls.¹⁴ Admittedly, there are no mounds or scrolls indicated here, but we should consider the paucity of existing evidence before discarding the idea that such features might have been incorporated into a major rood group such as this.¹⁵ Alternatively, and more simply, the figures of the Virgin and St John may actually have been suspended at a relatively high level above the *pulpitum*, to bring them closer to that of Christ.

The possibility exists that whoever inserted the sketch took a smaller image than the great rood itself for his model. At first glance, it may be thought that the cross in particular, with its moulded base, looks more like an altar crucifix than a monumental one. Small-scale metalwork rood groups are described in English medieval inventories,¹⁶ and that Glastonbury had its share of such ornaments need not be questioned. However, while the notion cannot be entirely discounted there are no strong grounds for accepting it. Certainly, it does not make the spatial relationship between the components of the ensemble any easier to understand. If the rood of the sketch must be likened to metalwork, then it may be pointed out that monumental rood groups might themselves be substantially composed of metal. The principal rood group (there were at least three, all of them metalwork) of the priory of St Swithun, Winchester, was described in 1539 as 'a Great Cross, (with) an image of Christ and Mary and John, being of plate silver and partly gilt'.¹⁷ Further, while lozenge-shaped fields at the extremities of the cross are found in many small-scale representations of the Crucifixion, they also appear on surviving Continental great roods,¹⁸ inviting us to assume that they featured on English ones as well.

In conclusion, there is no compelling reason for supposing that the R. 5. 16 sketch represents anything other than the rood group that John of Glastonbury tells us was set up by Abbot Taunton. While its low artistic quality and lack of precise detail may be considered unfortunate, its rarity and intrinsic interest more than compensate for this. It provides a visual record (however schematic) not only of a major, documented work of medieval Benedictine art, but also of an example of a class of devotional object which has been entirely lost to us. It is, moreover, the sole artistic reflection we have of Walter of Taunton's brief abbacy.¹⁹ This alone seems reason enough to draw attention to its existence.

AUTHOR

Julian M. Luxford, Clare College, Cambridge, CB2 1TL

REFERENCES

¹ A. Vallence, 'The pulpitum and rood-screen in monastic and cathedral churches', *Trans St Paul's Ecc Soc*, VI (1906), 185–200 (at 189). Large monastic churches might have more than one monumental rood group, of course. Winchester, as we will see, had at least three, and three have also been conjectured for Glastonbury; see A.E. Henderson, 'Plan of Glastonbury Abbey Church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Peter and St. Paul. Restored to the year 1539, showing suggested arrangements', *Trans St Paul's Ecc Soc*, X (1937), 107–10. The third drawing of the Islip Roll shows a monumental rood group over the high altar at Westminster; see W.H. St J. Hope, 'The Obituary Roll of John Islip, Abbot of Westminster, 1500–1532, with notes on other English Obituary Rolls', *Vetusta Monumenta*, VII (1906) 39–51, at pl. XXII.

² On the Cullompton base (known as the 'Golgotha' due to its iconography), see N. Pevsner and B. Cherry, *The Buildings of England: Devon* (Harmondsworth, 1989), 304.

³ See E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), 386.

- ⁴ On the incident at St Nicholas's Priory, see J. Youings, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (London, 1971), 164–5.
- ⁵ However, Ludham parish church, Norfolk, retains a relatively well-preserved 15th-century painted crucifixion group on the chancel arch, N. Pevsner and B. Wilson, *The Buildings of England: Norfolk I: Norwich and North East* (Harmondsworth, 1997), 602.
- ⁶ Hope, 'The Obituary Roll', 47 and plate XXII. Here, the rood group incorporates two seraphim. This seems to have been a widespread arrangement; cf. the great roods of Christ Church, Canterbury (as described by Gervase) and Durham, discussed in W.H. St J. Hope, 'Quire Screens in English Churches with special reference to the Twelfth-Century Screen formerly in the Cathedral Church of Ely', *Archaeologia* (2nd. Ser.), XVIII (1917), 43–110 (at 72–3, Durham; 76, Christ Church, Canterbury).
- ⁷ M.R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge*, vol. 2, (Cambridge 1901), 185.
- ⁸ J.P. Carley (ed.), *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey* (Woodbridge, 1985), 256–7. Abbot Taunton's *pulpitum* was built between the two eastern piers of the crossing. For a conjectural reconstruction of its elevation, see F.B. Bond and H. Camm, *Roodcreens and Roodlofts*, vol. I (London, 1909), pl. 5. Abbot Taunton was buried in the crossing before his *pulpitum*, literally in the shadow of the rood group he is credited with commissioning.
- ⁹ TCC. MS. R. 5. 16, pp. 117, 161, 199, 207, 211. I have prepared a paper on these drawings, which includes a more thorough discussion of their dating: 'Auro et Argento Pulcherrime Fabricatum: New Visual Evidence for the Feretory of St Dunstan at Glastonbury and its Relation to the Controversy over the Relics', to be published in the *Antiquaries Journal*.
- ¹⁰ In particular, the rustic capitals 'M' of the inscription on p. 161 and 'A' of that on p. 207 suggest a date not earlier than c. 1500. I am very grateful to Professor Malcolm Parkes for the benefit of his expertise in this regard.
- ¹¹ Evidence for the Glastonbury provenance of R. 5. 16 is presented in Carley, *Chronicle*, xi–xiv.
- ¹² British Library, Lansdowne MS. 417, f.4r. This drawing, also clearly the work of a non-professional artist (most likely a monk), is approximately the same size as the drawing in R. 5. 16. It almost certainly represents a cult image that stood in Malmesbury Abbey church. The image is currently unpublished.
- ¹³ Oxford, Bodleian Library Wood MS. Empt. 1, ff.32v., 68v. These images, which are coloured, represent respectively the *Arma Christi* and the Yoke of Obedience. They are unpublished.
- ¹⁴ For English examples in metalwork see C.C. Oman, *English Church Plate, 597–1830* (Oxford, 1957), pl. 40 fig. b; P.C. Claussen, 'Goldschmiede Mittelalters. Quellen zur Struktur ihrer Werkstatt am Beispiel der Schreine von Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, Westminster Abbey in London, St. Gertrud in Nivelles und St. John in Beverley', *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft*, 32 (1978), 46–86 (at 70 fig. 18). For a continental example, see *ibid.*, 50 fig. 2.
- ¹⁵ The faint horizontal line that apparently indicates the plane upon which the Virgin and St John stand looks as though it has been inserted as a guide to the illustrator, and not in order to represent an actual feature of the great rood.
- ¹⁶ For example Oman, *Church Plate*, 73.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ¹⁸ See for examples G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, vol. II (London, 1972), 146, 148 and figs. 480, 489.
- ¹⁹ Walter of Taunton ruled for less than a month during December 1322 and January 1323, having previously served as prior of Glastonbury. It thus seems likely that the chronicle ascribes deeds to his abbacy which he actually accomplished as prior: J.P. Carley, *Glastonbury Abbey: The Holy House at the Head of the Moors Adventurous* (Glastonbury, 1996), 39–40.