

A SCULPTURE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST AT MUCHELNEY ABBEY

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Despite the wreck that occurred in the wake of its dissolution in 1538, Muchelney abbey retains numerous interesting and important pieces of medieval sculpture. One of these is a figure carved in high relief on an architectural support, said to have been discovered at Thorney, three miles south of Muchelney, during the demolition of an old house in 1936 (Fig. 1).¹ Thorney was part of Muchelney abbey's Anglo-Saxon endowment, but it did not have buildings of the type likely to have displayed such a sculpture during the late Middle Ages.² It is thus reasonable to think that the figure was taken for building material from the abbey site in the period following the dissolution.³ The way in which the most protrusive parts of the figure have been levelled off with a chisel and tooled to encourage mortar bonding is clear evidence of the post-medieval use to which the sculpture was put. With its neatly squared sides and oblong shape, the block on which it is carved would have served well as a lintel, quoin or simply as part of a masonry course in a wall. Sculptures of this sort were frequently sawn up for building material after removal from their religious contexts.⁴

The sculpture is carved of limestone, and measures, in its current state, *c.* 900 × 300 × 330mm. (Originally, the figure must have stood at least 200mm taller.) It represents a bearded man standing in a frontal pose, holding an object in his left hand to which he points with the index finger of his right. In proportion to the body, the hands and what remains of the head are large, following a convention in late medieval art which sought to emphasise the gestural and symbolic importance

of these parts of the body. The figure is clad in a garment with broad v-shaped folds over the stomach and groin and an open neck which displays an area of bare chest. Over this garment is a loose mantle with pendulous sleeves. All of the head is missing above the level of the mouth, and the object held in the left hand has also been damaged. It is clear, however, that the figure had shoulder-length hair and a short, forked beard. Surviving traces on the right side of the head show that these were grooved with shallow lines to suggest individual tresses (Fig. 2): this grooving is of a generic style seen on other surviving late medieval sculpture at Muchelney. The shape of the beard supplies the best evidence for dating the figure. Short, forked beards of this type became common in art during the reign of Richard II (1377–99), and remained in use throughout the following century.⁵ Other examples exist at Muchelney on two vault-bosses sculpted with male heads now displayed in the cloister. The figure is thus broadly datable to the late 14th or 15th century, although execution in the early 16th century is also possible. Indeed, the style of the architectural matrix in which the figure is set (discussed below) suggests a date in or after the mid-15th century, a period during which much of the abbey's building-stock was renewed.⁶

Some architectural detailing survives on the block from which the figure was carved. On either side of the figure is a vertical shaft of square section, with a sloping, stepped out base. This is articulated on the sides of the block by continuous vertical grooves. On the right side of the figure



Fig. 1 Late medieval sculpture of St John the Baptist at Muchelney abbey; photo: author

there is a section of neatly finished, smooth stone behind this groove, while on the left side the stone behind the groove is roughly dressed. Fairly obviously, the shafts were the vertical elements of a shallow tabernacle in which the figure once stood. The canopy of this tabernacle, whatever its original form, has been cut off at or immediately below the level of its springing. Both the figure and its tabernacle were carved from a single block: their truncation is uneven and thus due to iconoclasm or post-dissolution cutting-down rather than the original presence of

a joint running through the stone at the height of the figure's mouth. The fact that the right side of the block is smoothly dressed (Fig. 3), and clearly intended to be visible, while the left side is rough may suggest that the figure originally stood at the end of a group of sculptures in tabernacles set into a monumental reredos, screen or other impressive furnishing. If so, then the rough tooling on the left side of the block would be due to the need to mortar this figure to another, presumably of the same dimensions, or else to some other sculpted component. It is also possible that the left side of the block was, like the right side, originally made to be visible, but that it was roughened to make it more susceptible to mortar bonding when reused for building. If this is the case then the figure will have been an isolated one, and it is possible to suppose that it embellished a slender buttress. As things stand it is impossible to be certain what its intended context of display was. The sculpture may as easily have been set into a conventual building as some part of the abbey church. When incorporated into church furnishings, large figures of this sort were more usually separately carved and dowelled into place than sculpted in high relief. While the crispness of some passages in the carving may suggest that it was displayed internally, a relatively sheltered external location is equally possible. No trace of original paint has been recorded on the figure, although it is likely to have been coloured in its original state.⁷

If the locus of display is questionable, more can be said about the figure's iconography. To date it has been thought to represent one of the kings considered in the Middle Ages to have been founders of the abbey: Ine (d. c. 726), Æthelstan (924–39) and Æthelred II (c. 966×8–1016).⁸ Along with Centwine of Wessex (c. 676–85), these were the benefactors in whose names the convent dispensed its charity, and who are represented as founders in the absolute or extended sense of the term in the abbey's cartulary.⁹ The belief that the sculpture represents a founder king hinges on the identification of the object held in the left hand as a donor's model of a church, a common motif in late-medieval founder-imagery, both in the west of England and further afield.¹⁰ If this identification were correct, then the possible candidates for identification would have to include St Peter, one of Muchelney's patron saints, whose iconographic attributes included a miniature church. The composite figure of St Peter and St Paul on the 14th-century seal of an



Fig. 2 Detail of the sculpture, showing stylised grooving of the hair and beard; photo: author

unidentified abbot of Muchelney holds such a church in its left hand.¹¹

Identification of the figure as a founder is superficially plausible because of the number of other founder figures represented in art of the period, and attractive because the appeal of late-medieval convents to a supposed golden age of pre-Conquest benefaction in their attempts to protect rights and property is a compelling aspect of English monastic history. There are, moreover, at least two examples in English late medieval art of King Æthelstan holding a donor's model church, although in his right rather than his left hand, and without pointing towards it.¹² On reflection, however, it is clear from both its general appearance and details of its carving that the figure at Muchelney represents St John the Baptist, one of the most popular and commonly portrayed of all saints. The grounds for this identification are straightforward. First, the normal way of representing John the Baptist in the later Middle Ages was in a frontal (or slightly oblique) standing pose, holding a disk inscribed with a lamb or a book with a lamb nestling on it in one hand and pointing to this with the other. In

most cases, the lamb is held in the left hand and the right hand is used to make the pointing gesture.¹³ This combination of attribute and gesture signifies the words of the Baptist as reported in the gospel of St John (1:29, 36): 'Behold the lamb of God'. The Muchelney figure corresponds precisely to this representational mode (compare eg Figs 4, 5). What has been taken for a model church, but in fact lacks the symmetry of such a motif, is actually a book with the lamb of God nestling on it. The outer legs of the lamb can still be seen, the separation of their lower parts from the book represented by a horizontal line, and the foreleg bent at the knee. A second, fainter horizontal line slightly above this indicates the articulation of the lamb's legs and belly. This is how the legs and body of the lamb are defined in contemporaneous images of the saint (Figs 4, 5).¹⁴ As at Muchelney, it is also common in these images to show the lamb's breast and head set back some little way from the left hand edge of the book.¹⁵ The upper part of the lamb has been broken off, perhaps in an iconoclastic defacement of the image which also claimed the figure's head.

The open-necked garment also contributes to



Fig. 3 Right side of the sculpture, showing architectural detailing; photo: author

the identification of the figure. According to the Bible, John the Baptist was roughly dressed and inhabited the desert. To emphasise his unkempt appearance, he is usually shown in art with a large area of his breast exposed, and with spindly, bare lower legs. Other than Christ, no other saint is customarily depicted in this manner. From the mid-14th century, John was often represented clad in a garment of camel's hair (following Matthew 3:4 and Mark 1:6), or with a camel's head and hooves attached to the lower part of his cloak. But artists were not bound to show him like this, and he was also given the generic flowing vestments conventional in representations of saints, with or without the exposed breast and bare legs.¹⁶ Because the lower part of the Muchelney figure has been cut back, it is impossible to be sure if



Fig. 4 Alabaster sculpture of St John the Baptist, made in England in the second half of the 15th century. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

it once incorporated a camel's hooves and/or head, although it is tempting to interpret a faintly defined feature that once protruded between the figure's legs as a camel's neck and head. It is very likely, however, that the isolated, vertical feature at the bottom right of the figure is one of the Baptist's bare legs (rather than a hanging fold of drapery), which were often splayed out like this in images of the saint.

As in the liturgical books of other monasteries, John the Baptist's two feasts – that of his Nativity, on 24 June, and Passion, on 29 August

– were graded as principals in the calendar of the surviving breviary from Muchelney.¹⁷ While it was conventional in the medieval Church to honour John the Baptist so highly, monastic celebration of his feasts had a particular significance, because the saint's eremitic existence in the wilderness (where he was thought to have inhabited caves) was considered both a prototype and authorizer of medieval cloistral life.¹⁸ This idea may have been particularly resonant at Muchelney, where periodic isolation by water and bad roads

must have made the monastery site seem like a wilderness.¹⁹ 'One can normally get through [to Muchelney] in summertime on foot or by horse, but not in winter', wrote William of Malmesbury.²⁰ In any case, the abbey is certain to have had at least several images of the saint in the sculpture, painting and stained glass of its church and conventual buildings, the fabric of its vestments and the illumination of its manuscripts. On the other hand, its monks were under no religious or moral obligation to display images of

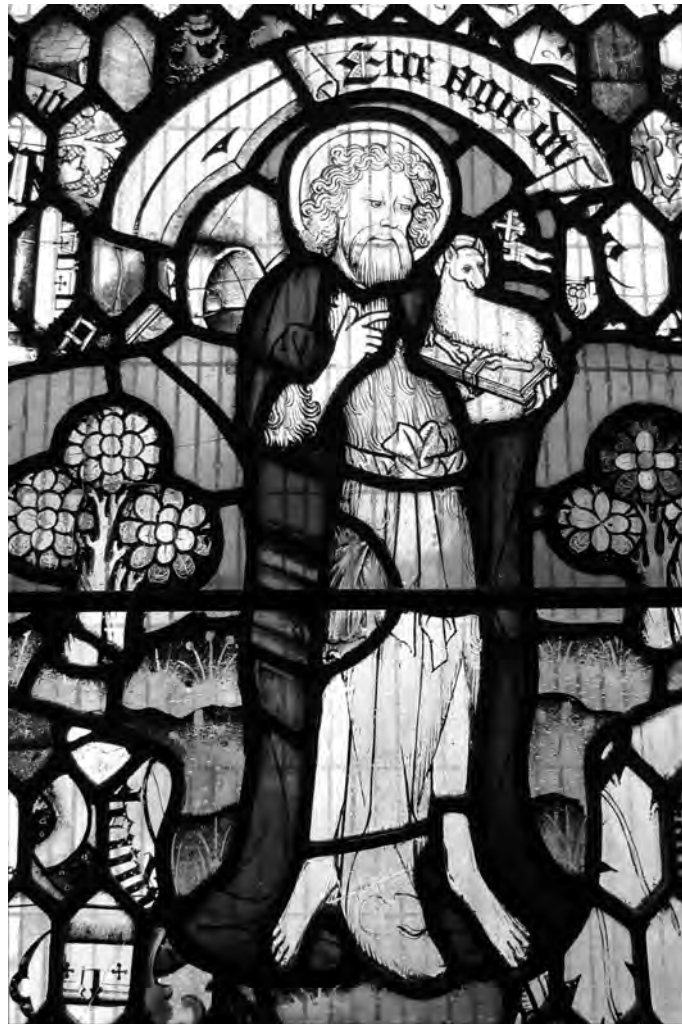


Fig. 5 Stained glass panel representing St John the Baptist, made in 1453 and now in the east window of the Guildhall at Norwich; photo: author

any of their founders, and the anniversary date of none is inscribed in the breviary's calendar.²¹ It is thus more probable that an image of John the Baptist should survive from Muchelney than one of a secular founder, and also more appropriate in terms of the monks' most intimate concerns.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Goodall and Kelly 2011, 15.
- ² Page (ed) 1911, 103.
- ³ Compare Goodall and Kelly 2011, 15.
- ⁴ See eg Atkinson 1935.
- ⁵ They are found, for example, on several of the sculpted kings on York Minster's pulpitum, which represent leading trends in figure-sculpture in the period c. 1440–60: see Brown 2003, 232–4. Numerous alabaster sculptures of the period 1450–1500 also have it: see eg Cheetham 2005, 54, 113–17, 182–3, 202–05, 239, 257–8, 292–3, 302–04, 306–09, 322, 324–5, 332.
- ⁶ On this renewal and the evidence for it see Pevsner 1958, 249–50; Dunning (ed) 1974, 40, 44.
- ⁷ The sculpture is not among those from the abbey considered by English Heritage to have original polychromy: see <http://stoneaudit.english-heritage.org.uk/Data/Site8.HTM> (accessed 22 August 2012).
- ⁸ Goodall and Kelly 2011, 15. The label currently displayed with the sculpture at Muchelney states: 'This fragment of 15th-century sculpture probably represents either King Ine or King Athelstan ... As a symbol of its status as a founder, the figure holds a model of the abbey church in its left hand.'
- ⁹ Dunning 2001, 19, 61 (testimony, of 1535, to the benefactors' names attached to conventual charity); Bates (ed) 1899, 3–7 (place of Ine, Æthelstan and Æthelred II in the abbey's history); Harvey (ed) 1969, 127, 129 (Ine as founder 'at the prompting of Bishop Hedda'). On the Anglo-Saxon endowments see also Aston 2009.
- ¹⁰ For West Country and west Midlands examples, see Luxford 2005, 33. These include the sculpture at Muchelney: the current article gives the author a chance to correct what he now realises is an error. On donors' models generally see Klinkenberg 2009.
- ¹¹ Birch 1887, 667.

- ¹² This is in the Toppes window in the parish church of St Peter Mancroft in Norwich, and on a restored panel-painting at Milton abbey, Doeset: see King 2006, clxxxix–cxcii, 91 and pl. 10b; Luxford 2005, pl. 20.
- ¹³ The book and nestling lamb had become the usual attribute by c. 1400. In the 14th century the disk and lamb were favoured: see Luxford 2010.
- ¹⁴ See also Cheetham 2003, figs 51, 52.
- ¹⁵ See eg Baker 2011, 48.
- ¹⁶ Eg Scott 1996, I, ills 226, 270; Cheetham 2005, 113; Binski and Panayotova (eds), 2005, 165.
- ¹⁷ The calendar is printed in Schofield (ed) 1927, 127–39; Wormald (ed) 1939–46, II, 91–103.
- ¹⁸ See Pantin 1950, 190–91; Luxford 2010, 139, 141.
- ¹⁹ This is nicely evoked for the pre-Conquest period by Aston 2007. See also, poetically, Hugo 1858, 78.
- ²⁰ Winterbottom and Thomson (eds) 2007, 313.
- ²¹ Which is not, of course, to say that there was no founder-imagery at Muchelney. Indeed, a 15th-century glass panel displaying a version of Æthelstan's attributed arms (*Quarterly Azure and Gules, a cross bottonny Argent*), now in the east window of the parish church (noted in Woodforde 1946, 120), can reasonably be supposed to have come from the abbey, or at least to have been paid for by the convent. The same arms are displayed in the abbot's hall at Milton abbey in Dorset, which Æthelstan founded c. 933. For the correct blazon of Æthelstan's arms, see Woodcock and Flower 2009, 162.

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