

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

The Harrowing of Hell Relief in Bristol Cathedral

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1976, Vol. 94, 101-106

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By M. Q. SMITH

THE SEVEN-FOOT-HIGH relief of the Harrowing of Hell now in the south transept of Bristol cathedral is the most dramatic evidence of the pre-Conquest church still to be seen in the city. Probably dateable to *c.* 1050, it is one of the finest carvings of its day in Britain, or indeed in western Europe.

The composition is dominated by the tall figure of Christ treading underfoot the bound and fettered, writhing figure of Satan. The pose of Christ is lively; at his heel the hem of his robe swings up, crossing the border of the relief. Christ's halo is without a cross on it, though by this period a cross on the nimbus was usual, appearing for example on the great rood at Romsey; since it is likely that the Bristol relief was originally painted, it may be presumed that the halo once had a cross painted on it. Christ has a full beard and moustache, and hair in broadly cut curls. In his right hand he holds a slender staff with a small cross at its head. With the other hand he pulls up or encourages two or three naked figures from the gaping jaws of Hell.

A horizontal fracture half-way up the slab, and related damage especially on the right side, makes it difficult to be certain of the number and exact positions of the small figures being redeemed. The left shoulder and arm of the front figure is quite distinct, but it is difficult to relate any of the three other upstretched arms visible below Christ's right hand to the body of the front little figure. Usually when two figures are shown in Hell-mouth, they can be identified as Adam and Eve, but it seems possible that on the Bristol relief a third figure was included.¹

The subject portrayed on the relief has biblical authority. In particular it is based on Christ's own words to Peter, 'Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it' (Matt. XVI, 18), and on Peter's sermon at Pentecost, 'the resurrection of Christ . . . his soul was not left in Hell' (Acts II, 31). The most important references in the Old Testament include David's words 'thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell, neither wilt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption' (Ps. XVI, 10). Christ himself identified the most telling Old Testament prefiguration in his words 'For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth' (Matt. XII, 40): it was thus that Christ 'went and preached to the spirits in prison' (1 Peter III, 19).

In early Christian art, Christ's conquest of death and the mystery of the resurrection are represented symbolically rather than literally. Episodes from the story of Jonah appear frequently, as do similarly symbolic episodes from the stories of Noah, Daniel, or the Three Young Men in the Fiery Furnace. A major literary parallel to such representations is the well-known prayer for the dying, *Ordo Commendationis Animae*. The Descent into Hell is not recorded as a mystery of faith until the early 6th century, when it appears in a Gallican creed; subsequently it was included in the so-called Apostles' Creed, formulated in its complete form in *c.* 750: 'He descended into Hell; the third day he rose again from the dead.' In such a formula, the article is held by all Christian churches.²

Two of the oldest representations of the Descent into Hell are in Rome. In a wall-painting perhaps of 705-7 in S Maria Antiqua, Christ is shown treading down the dark-skinned, bound figure

1. A clearer treatment of the same subject will help the unaccustomed eye interpret the design: e.g. in one of the pair of initials to Ps. I in the Winchester Bible: W. Oakeshott, *The Artists of the Winchester Bible* (1945), pl. xxii.

2. H. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (1943), 43.

of Satan, and pulling up two clothed figures from Hell.³ The subject was apparently recognized in Christian art in Rome by this period, for it survives also in another wall-painting, probably of the 8th century also, in the lower church of S. Clemente.⁴

In the later history of the representation of the Descent into Hell, considerable developments in the iconography of the subject were made by Byzantine artists. The Descent into Hell, usually given the title *Anastasis*, the Awakening, or Raising Up, is the subject normally chosen to depict the resurrection. A typical example of a date roughly contemporary with the Bristol slab is that in mosaic at Daphne: it shows, as do most Byzantine or Byzantine inspired examples, the broken gates of Hell, and a large number of persons, many of whom can be identified, awaiting redemption.⁵

It seems, however, quite unnecessary to seek far afield for sources and parallels for the iconography of the Bristol slab: the evidence needed to explain its style and meaning are to be found within the local contemporary context, in the literature and art of late Anglo-Saxon England.

In the Anglo-Saxon poem of *Christ and Satan*, of which the second part is devoted to the *Descent into Hell*, all the major elements of the iconography of the Bristol slab are recorded:

‘The Lord himself had laid low the fiend . . .
Then he caused the blessed souls, the race of Adam,
to rise up; and Eve could not yet look upon
heaven till she uttered the words “I angered thee
once, eternal God, when Adam and I through the
serpent’s malice ate two apples, as we should
not have done . . . (Satan) is now firm in fetters.” ’⁶

Very interestingly, it is in this Caedmon manuscript which contains this poem that we find what is probably the first representation in British art of Hell-mouth, and also the first representation of Satan in chains. The drawing, approximately 9 × 7¾ ins, on f. 3 is of the Fall of the Rebel Angels, not of the Descent into Hell; and indeed the section of manuscript devoted to *Christ and Satan*, pp. 213–29, is not illustrated nor are spaces left for drawings.⁷ Professor Wormald suggested that the drawings in this manuscript are ‘fairly close copies of an earlier manuscript, possibly of the period of Athelstan.’⁸ Clearly the subject of Hell-mouth and a bound Satan was well-established, for a similar image appears in the lower part of a depiction of the Last Judgement in the New Minster (Winchester) *Liber Vitae*, of 1016–22.⁹

What is almost certainly the oldest British representation of the Descent into Hell is found in

3. P. Romanelli and P. J. Nordhagen, *S. Maria Antiqua* (1964), 60, pls 30–1. Perhaps the very earliest representation of the Descent into Hell is that on the right hand front column of the ciborium at S. Mark’s, Venice; its date and provenance are both uncertain: W. F. Volbach, *Early Christian Art* (1961), 327 and pl. 83. A. Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (1969), xlvi, 126, relates the scene to representations e.g. on coins, of victorious Roman emperors pulling up representations or personifications of conquered cities or provinces; O. Demus, *Byzantine Art and Archaeology* (1911 and 1961), 662 quotes Strzowski’s suggested parallel with the Egyptian myth of Setnes’ visit to Amenti, the underworld.

4. E. W. Anthony, *Romanesque Frescoes* (1951), 67 and fig. 51; colour reproduction in C. F. Guglielmo, *Roma, S. Clemente* (Treasures of Christian Art, 1966), pl. 2.

5. For a summary of the use of the Anastasis in western art, see K. Weitzmann, ‘Various Aspects of Byzantine Influence on Latin Countries, VI–XII centuries’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* xx (1966), esp. pp. 18–19, n. 69. See also E. Male, *L’Art Religieux du XII Siècle* (1953), 115, with a footnote mentioning the Bristol relief.

For the developed narrative in the Gospel of Nicodemus or Acts of Pilate, see M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (1955), 117–46.

An interesting late example of the subject is the painting by Bellini (related to an engraving by Mantegna), in Bristol City Art Gallery.

6. Translation from R. K. Gordon, *Anglo-Saxon Poems* (Everyman, 1934), 126–32. Critical editions include G. P. Krapp, *The Junius Manuscript* (1931) which supports (p. xxxvi) a date 790–830.

7. C. Kennedy and C. R. Morey, *The Caedmon Poems* (Princeton, 1916); I. Gollancz, *The Caedmon Manuscript* (Facsimile, 1927). Or see D. Talbot Rice, *Oxford History of English Art 871–1100* (1952), 203–4 and pl. 68. The manuscript is Oxford: Bodleian MS. Junius xi.

8. F. Wormald, *English Drawings of the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (1952), 76.

9. British Museum: Stowe MS. 944, f. 3; the illustration is approximately 10¾ × 5¾ ins; it is reproduced and discussed in D. Talbot Rice, 217 and 218, pl. 84.

another manuscript probably of Winchester origin, the psalter now in the British Museum, Cotton Tiberius C.vi, dateable to c. 1050; as we shall see this manuscript provides stylistic comparisons which help us date the Bristol relief.

A group of 11th- and 12th-century reliefs show that the subject of the Descent into Hell became well-known in the Bristol area. At Quenington, five miles east of Cirencester, a relief has been set in the tympanum of the Norman church.¹⁰ Although of different proportions and scale, it shares a number of iconographical features with the Bristol slab. The dominating figure of Christ moves from left to right. In his hand he carries a staff with a small cross-head, as on the Bristol slab: this feature is characteristic in late Anglo-Saxon representations of a triumphant Christ.¹¹ Christ's halo is marked with a *raised* cross. Beneath his feet is the elongated figure of the fettered Satan, and the wide-gaping jaws of Hell. Instead of only two figures shown being raised, there are three, each quite distinct from each other. Above them is the blazing disc of the sun—a feature explained, as is the presence of other figures in Hell, by a passage in the Gospel of Nicodemus:

'We, then, were in Hell together . . . and at the hour of midnight there rose upon those dark places as it were the light of the sun, and all we were enlightened and beheld one another. And straightway our father Abraham, together with the patriarchs and prophets, were all at once filled with joy and said one to another: This light cometh of the great lightening. The prophet Esaias being there present said: This light is of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, concerning which I prophesied when I was yet alive, saying: The land of Zabulon and the land of Nephthalim, the people that sat in darkness, hath seen a great light. . . .'¹²

About eight miles from Quenington, at South Cerney, is another relief of the Descent into Hell, once more set over the south door.¹³ It is closely related to the Quenington relief, but is shown with a second subject, a Christ in majesty. The two subjects are arranged one above the other in linked frames each based on the form of a circle: this formula appears in three of the illustrations to Creation in the Caedmon manuscript.¹⁴

Although the pre-Conquest date has been proposed by some authorities for the Quenington carving, it is not impossible that both the Quenington and South Cerney carvings are of 12th-century date, for the subject of the Harrowing of Hell remained in the repertoire locally until at least c. 1130–40, when it appeared on one of the two tympana at Shobdon; the other bears a depiction of a majesty. But the Harrowing of Hell does not coincide closely with the Bristol pattern: instead, Christ is shown in the centre of the relief, with figures behind as well as in front of him. The closest surviving parallel to the Shobdon tympanum would seem to be that of the tympanum of the central west door at Bitonto, Apulia.¹⁵

Slightly earlier than the Shobdon tympanum, and by far the best parallel in sculpture to the Bristol relief is the Harrowing of Hell on one of the displaced capitals of the choir of Hereford cathedral. The capitals are work of c. 1115, and in style and iconography seem to show direct links with pre-Conquest works. Although much smaller than the Bristol slab, the Hereford capital displays much the same quality in execution. As Professor Zarnecki has pointed out 'The influence of manuscript illumination . . . is seen in a linear style that derives from drawing.'¹⁶ Iconographically, three differences from the Bristol form may be noted: the Hand of God is shown in the top

10. J. Knowles and C. E. Keyser, 'Symbolism in Norman Sculpture at Quenington', *Arch. Jnl.* LXII (1905), 147, 155–6; D. Verey and N. Pevsner, *Gloucestershire: The Cotswolds* (1970), 374 and pl. 14.

11. E.g. Benedictional of S. Aethelwold, f. 9v: Second Coming of Christ—a figure which is not dissimilar to the Bristol Christ; reproduced in F. Wormald, *The Benedictional of S. Aethelwold* (1959), pl. 5.

12. M. R. James, 123–4; for the cross in Christ's hand, see 139.

13. *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, LIII (1931), pl. opp. p. 56; for dating problems, see D. Talbot Rice, 154.

14. I. Gollancz, xxxix–xl.

15. C. E. Keyser, *Norman Tympana and Lintels* (2nd edn, 1927), pl. 96: Shobdon; pl. 95 shows another example at Beckford, Worcs. For Bitonto see A. Kingsley Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Routes* (1923) I, pls 232–3. The subject also appears on a capital from La Daurade, Toulouse: see P. Mesple, *Toulouse, Musée des Augustins: Les Sculptures Romanes* (1961), nos 140–2, and in the same formula in the Avila Bible, Paris B.N. Madrid E.R. 8.

16. G. Zarnecki, *English Romanesque Sculpture 1066–1140* (1951), 21, 29, pl. 27.

left-hand corner; Christ carries a banner rather than a staff; and there seem to be four figures within the jaws of Hell.

When we come to attempt an exact dating for the Bristol relief, our difficulties are apparent. The subject of the Harrowing of Hell seems to have developed in England during the 11th century, or perhaps a little earlier. H. Swarzenski has, indeed, suggested that the Bristol relief could be perhaps of late 10th-century date.¹⁷ Unfortunately there is insufficient material of a similar nature for us to be able to date the relief on iconographic evidence, for the subject remains in the sculptor's repertoire, with few changes, until the middle of the 12th century. Any attempt at precise dating must therefore rest mainly on stylistic grounds: the majority of modern authorities agree in dating the Bristol relief to the decade immediately preceding the Conquest.¹⁸

The character of the carving is forceful and effective in its impact on the eye. The design is bold, and the scale impressive. The sculptor was however not entirely successful in maintaining a balance between naturalistic proportions and the overall linear pattern; at the level of Christ's waist, and more particularly over his left shoulder, the carving of the drapery is not at all convincing, and the ambiguities between linear design and anatomy are somewhat distracting.

The way in which the Bristol slab is executed is curious, and seems to be characteristic of the period. All the detailing, for folds of drapery or for the hair and beard of Christ, is executed in incised lines, while the individual figures are exposed in low relief silhouettes by the scooping out of the background. Another example of this technique is the relief of the Madonna and Child at Shelford, Notts., which has been dated to the middle of the 11th century.¹⁹ An important local parallel to the Bristol slab was suggested by Professor Talbot Rice: this is the relief now set in the south face of the tower of Beverstone church, near Tetbury. The relief is about five feet tall—that is to say, much the same size as the Bristol slab, and it is carved in a similar manner. Christ is shown frontally, full-length, one hand raised in blessing, the other holding a cross-staff. The pose of the upright figure and the flying ends of drapery at hip-level are paralleled in several pre-Conquest manuscripts, suggesting a date in the late 10th or early 11th century, but the exact interpretation of the figures is far from clear.²⁰

The slab at Beverstone, like the Bristol slab, is irregularly shaped, tapering quite noticeably from the bottom at Beverstone and from the top at Bristol. This trapezoidal shape is also found elsewhere at this period, as for instance for the pair of flying angels at Bradford-on-Avon, probably dateable to the period 973–1000, when the church was considerably restored and altered.²¹ No doubt these angels once flanked a great rood, forming a composition like that shown in the Crucifixion page of the Sherborne Pontifical, dateable to c. 992–5. Although this manuscript drawing is only about $12\frac{1}{2} \times 8$ ins overall, it has great monumentality: the parallels so often made between these late Saxon carvings and late Saxon manuscripts seem absolutely valid. Indeed, it has been pointed out that one of the Bradford angels can be compared with an angel shown on page 30 of the Caedmon manuscript referred to above.²²

17. H. Swarzenski, in a footnote, p. 71, in F. Saxl, *English Sculpture of the Twelfth Century* (1954), suggesting parallels with S. Cuthbert's stole at Durham, and with the Christ and S. Dunstan, in Bodleian MS. Auct. F. iv, 32, f. 1.

18. A. Gardner, *English Medieval Sculpture* (1951), 48: c. 1066; G. Zarnecki, 29: c. 1050; D. Talbot Rice, 96–8: c. 1050; F. Saxl, 36–7: 11th century; L. Stone, *Sculpture in Britain: The Middle Ages* (1955), 38–9: c. 1050; N. Pevsner, *North Somerset and Bristol* (1958), 303: c. 1050; J. Beckwith, *Ivory Carvings in Early Medieval England* (1972), 34: early 11th century.

19. L. Stone, 37, pl. 22 (b), with a suggestion, expressed more forcibly by D. Talbot Rice, 142, that it was a part of a cross.

20. E.g. Dunstan at the feet of Christ; God the Son; and Christ treading down the beasts, all of which are reproduced in M. Rickerts, *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages* (1954), pls 22, 23 and 24. It is relevant to note that no part of Beverstone church seems to be clearly of pre-Conquest date. Compare too the Christ relief at Jevington, Sussex and the relief at Stanton S. Quinton, Wilts., on which see C. Hewer, 'The Christ Relief at Stanton S. Quinton (unpublished dissertation, Edinburgh, 1966).

21. D. Talbot Rice, pls 7 (a), 7 (b); for angels at Winterbourne Steepleton and at Deerhurst, see pls 8 (a) and 8 (b).

22. The Sherborne Pontifical, Paris B.N. MS. Lat. 943, f. 4v is reproduced in M. Rickerts, pl. 24.

There is thus good evidence to support the assertion made by T. D. Kendrick that the Bristol carving is 'the equivalent in stone of the Winchester art (of manuscript illustration)'.²³ The characteristic lightfootedness of the Bristol Christ and the flying drapery at his heel are both features found in a number of English drawings of the 11th and 12th centuries. An exact comparison has been suggested between the Bristol slab and a Winchester manuscript of c. 1050, the psalter in the British Museum, Cotton Tiberius C.vi.²⁴

Each of the drawings of the psalter measures about 10 × 6 ins. The Harrowing of Hell is shown on f.14. Five small figures are shown in Hell-mouth, the first and last naked. The dominating figure of Christ is not fully upright, as on the Bristol slab, but hunched over with his head bent down to waist level, perhaps due to the limitations imposed upon the artist by the shape of the page. The bottom corner of the page is filled by the bound figure of Satan and a dragon. Although of iconographic relevance in our study of the Bristol relief, the illustration is of less help for stylistic analysis for it is a pen drawing with calligraphic complexities not to be expected in a boldly cut, large scale relief. A more valid stylistic comparison can be made with the fully coloured page, f.30v, showing David and his musicians. The figures have something of the plain weightiness of the Bristol relief. At the shoulders are curious hook-folds which appear also in a similar position on Christ's shoulder. In the painting as on the carving, the drapery between the thighs is marked with a short series of three or four V-shaped folds; in both works, the hair is represented by tidy rows of curls, while profiles are rendered as straight lines.

Obviously such parallels between manuscripts and carvings are not accidental. Professor Wormald pointed out a likeness between a St Michael and the Dragon on f.16 of Cotton Tiberius C.vi and a tympanum at Southwell. K. J. Galbraith has found parallels between the sculptures of the south porch of Malmesbury Abbey and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, including several with the Caedmon manuscript. Many other parallels between manuscripts and sculptures have been published by Professor Zarnecki; among the most interesting of them are the relationship between depictions of the Tree of Jesse and of St Michael carrying souls, both in the Shaftesbury Psalter, and similar designs on tomb slabs at Lincoln and at Ely respectively.²⁵

It seems possible, therefore, to suggest that the iconography of the Bristol slab was based on manuscript illustrations, perhaps on illustrations to a text of the same subject. In style, too, the carving owes much to that now represented most fully by surviving manuscripts. The full quality of the relief is, however, apparent only when seen full size.

The style of the carving was influenced also by the texture of the stone. In its present condition, the slab is now very much darkened, and its surface very badly pitted. Little if any of the original surface seems to have survived. Dr R. G. Savage has identified the stone as a Jurassic limestone, though he states that it is not from the local source, Dundry, nor from Doulting. As E. M. Jope has shown, even when a suitable building stone was available locally, stone from another source was frequently preferred for carved work: the implication of this must be that sculptors of figural work were frequently based at or near a suitable quarry, not that they worked as itinerant artists, and that they had with them at the quarry patterns from the ecclesiastical centre.²⁶ The slabs at Lincoln and Ely, referred to above, are of Tournai marble, not of a local material.

23. T. D. Kendrick, *Late Saxon and Viking Art* (1949), 43.

24. F. Saxl, pl. 23, FIGS 4-5; for the manuscript, see F. Wormald, 'An English XI century Psalter with Pictures', *Walpole Soc.* xxxviii (1960-2), 1-13.

25. K. J. Galbraith, 'The Iconography of the Biblical Scenes at Malmesbury Abbey', *Jnl. Brit. Arch. Assoc.* (1965).

G. Zarnecki, *The Early Sculptures of Ely Cathedral* (1958).

G. Zarnecki, *Romanesque Sculpture at Lincoln Cathedral* (n.d.), 21, pls 23 and 24.

The Shaftesbury Psalter in British Museum MS. Lansdowne 383; the illuminations measure approx. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 5 $\frac{3}{8}$ ins.

26. E. M. Jope, 'The Saxon Building Stone Industry in Southern and Midland England', *Medieval Archaeology* viii (1964), 91-118; cf capitals and sarcophagi made near the foothills of the Pyrenees and exported as far as the Seine and Rhone valleys: J. Hubert, J. Porcher and W. F. Volbach, *Europe in the Dark Ages* (1969), 34-5, pls 39-40, map FIG. 360.

It is very highly probable that the Bristol slab was originally coloured, and although contemporary manuscripts provide some help, a better parallel giving some idea of the effects that may have been achieved on a monumental scale is provided by the 9th-century wall-painting of the Descent into Hell at Müstair, Switzerland. The sleeve of Christ's robe is white, the gown over the shoulder and across the body is coloured, with darker bands; Christ's face and hands, and the naked figures in Hell are also coloured in a more-or-less naturalistic manner, with the mouth and eyes, hair and beards picked out in detail.²⁷ The effect of such colouring on the Bristol slab would be to strengthen the bold effect of the design, and make clear details that are now difficult to decipher.

Two related problems remain—the purpose and the original position of the relief. It was apparently discovered under the floor of the Chapter House during the restoration of the building after the fire of 1831. At its discovery, the relief served as the lid of a coffin, but this is unlikely to have been its original function, for a coffin-lid would have its broadest part at the shoulders, not at the feet.²⁸ Almost certainly the relief was meant to be placed in an architectural setting. The Harrowing of Hell could appear in a narrative context, as in the long frieze on Lincoln west front, or in the wall-paintings at Chaldon, Surrey.²⁹ But the shape of the slab would suggest that it was an independent work, and it would be dangerous to be too bold in suggesting a possible site since the Anglo-Saxons frequently placed their carvings in what seems now to be haphazardly selected positions.

In its present position, dirtied by age, and damaged, the relief remains a most impressive piece of work. As the sculptural element over a doorway, it would have created an unforgettable effect. It seems to be at least a century older than any visible part of the church in which it is displayed, a century older than any of the present churches of Bristol. Perhaps it is the sole surviving relic of the chapel of St Jordan, on the site of which the present cathedral was built.³⁰

Acknowledgements

I must thank the vergers and masons at the cathedral, and Dr R. G. Savage of the Department of Geology, Bristol University, for their interest and help; and my colleague, Mr J. A. Robertson for help with photographs used in the lecture at a Bristol University Summer School, on which this article is based.

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27. Colour plate in J. Hubert, J. Porcher and W. F. Volbach, pl. 166 B.

28. H. J. L. J. Massé, *Bristol* (Bell, 1910), 95; Very Rev. D. E. W. Harrison, *Pictorial History of Bristol Cathedral* (1962), p. 8 reports a tradition that the relief may have come from Shobdon, one of the sites of church of Augustinian Canons from which the first canons of Bristol derive. Chapter Houses are regularly used for burials; cf e.g. Chester or Kirkstall.

29. G. Zarnecki, *Romanesque Sculpture at Lincoln Cathedral* (n.d.), 8–9, pls 15 a and 15 b; for Chaldon, see A. Caiger-Smith, *English Medieval Mural Paintings* (1963), pl. XII.

30. For S. Jordan's chapel, see E. W. Godwin, 'Bristol Cathedral', *Archaeol. Jnl.* xx (1863), 39–40.



Harrowing of Hell relief, Bristol Cathedral
Photo: G. Kelsey