

GRAVE GOODS, GOSPELS AND CARVINGS

John Hunt

Mercia had a rich material culture during the six-hundred years of its existence. Artefacts, manuscripts, sculptures, friezes and crosses reflected the beliefs, perceptions and achievements of Anglo-Saxon society.

The most important objects for the earliest years come from burials and grave goods, found for instance, in Warwickshire cemeteries dating from between the late-fifth and the early-seventh centuries. Wasperton, Longbridge, Baginton and Bidford on Avon have provided impressive objects, among them brooches, weapons and a bronze-bound bucket, many with zoomorphic or animal-like decoration.

However, the mission of Pope Gregory that established the Roman Church in England brought profound change to English society and culture. Through this new religion the Germanic kings came into direct contact with the world of Roman civilisation, of which they stood in awe; not only did the Church provide models of kingship, it also introduced the tradition of written law, and with it the book.

Culturally, the impact was immense. Not only did this announce the arrival of literacy, it brought a new vehicle for artistic expression, and heralded a Christian culture that would define the artistic activity of Anglo-Saxon England in ways not previously imagined.



Illuminated manuscripts drew on intellectual and artistic talent. The magnificent carpet page from the eighth-century St Chad Gospels, housed at Lichfield Cathedral.

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The Production of Texts

The ‘power-house’ of this early church was Anglo-Saxon monasticism. Bastions of the Faith, they were home to intellectual and artistic talent and to the demand that called for illuminated manuscripts, painted glass, sculpture and fine buildings.

The eighth and ninth centuries saw manuscript production south of the Humber come into its own. The ‘Mercian supremacy’ brought a wide area into its ‘cultural affinity’, particularly Kent and the important centre at Canterbury; yet the highpoint associated with the reign of Offa (757-796 AD) is poorly represented by surviving manuscripts, although he was a patron, donating a great Bible with two gold bracelets to Worcester. Mercian *scriptoria* likely included Lichfield and Worcester, Michelle Brown having suggested that the latter might be ranked with Canterbury and Wearmouth/Jarrow in Northumbria as major centres of manuscript production.

Commonly associated with Mercia are the early-eighth-century ‘Gospels of Saint Chad’ (‘Lichfield Gospels’) whose patronage and place of production are not certainly known. Links with Northumbria and Iona, the ‘Hereford Gospels’, and Wales have all been suggested, and recently the possibility of a Lichfield origin has been reawakened. Wherever produced, they owe a debt to other works. The ‘Lindisfarne Gospels’ provided the model for the Chad incarnation initial and may have inspired the carpet page with its tightly packed animal interlace, reflecting longstanding Anglo-Saxon fondness for zoomorphic design; the Lion, symbol of the evangelist Saint Mark, recalls the *‘Imago Leonis’* in the late-seventh-century ‘Gospels of Saint Willibrord’ (‘Echternach Gospels’) probably produced in the Northumbrian Abbey at Lindisfarne.

Mercian accomplishment is more certainly reflected in the ‘Book of Cerne’, the only surviving illuminated manuscript firmly attributed to the kingdom of Mercia, produced somewhere in central or western Mercia. Stylistically dated to the 820s-840s, this prayer book, if not actually produced at Worcester, likely came to reside there, perhaps via Lichfield, sheltering from the Scandinavian incursions. The work takes themes of salvation and the communion of saints, evoking a mystical relationship linking Christ, the Evangelists and the faithful.



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The eighth-century Lichfield Angel, a stunning Mercian discovery, possibly from St Chad’s shrine.

Sculpture and Carvings

Among the most stunning of recent Mercian discoveries is the polychrome sculpture of an angel from Lichfield, possibly an end panel from Saint Chad’s shrine. In the late-eighth century Chad’s timber shrine was either replaced, or perhaps encased, by stone. In a Byzantine-derived style dating to the late-eighth century, and testifying to the quality of sculpture in Mercia, this accomplished carving, 60cm high, represents the Archangel Gabriel, descending to tell the Virgin Mary that she will bear the Christ child; a missing section would have depicted an Annunciation scene.

The pre-eminence of Northumbrian sculpture in the seventh century must by the eighth and ninth centuries be shared with Mercia. The largest *corpus* is the late-eighth-century work at Breedon-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire. Arranged in long narrow friezes and panels, plant scroll is the dominant motif, some of which is ‘inhabited’ with birds and beasts, while others have human figures, with a notable freedom of movement and expression. These figures are very varied – magnificent striding birds, long-necked birds, quadrupeds and ‘Anglian beasts’, all with characteristic drilled eyes. Human figures include horsemen with spears, and a vineyard scene, comparable with a fragment from Ingleby. Like that in the same tradition from Castor and Fletton, this high relief carving reflects the sculptural traditions and artistic importance of the great monasteries of Peterborough, Ely and their dependencies.

Of more monumental character is the figure relief carving. It was probably as a result of contact with Eastern art and the Continent in the eighth century that new forms were introduced into England, notably a new iconography of single and paired figures in architectural settings, as at Breedon. Traditionally interpreted as panels from a sarcophagus, some have been alternatively reconstructed as remnants from a Mediterranean style baptistery, the east wall dominated by an altar cross or carving of Christ, with the apostle figures approaching from right and left, each colourfully painted. A 'Virgin Mary' panel interestingly confuses its iconographic model with an apostle, while a late-ninth-century carving of an angel with Byzantine affiliations demonstrates another distinct and later figure style.

Cross-Shafts and Cross-Heads

Western and south-western Mercia lacks survivals on this scale. More common are fragments of cross-shafts and cross-heads like Wroxeter (Shropshire), Acton Beauchamp (Herefordshire) and Crophthorne (Worcestershire), dated c.800 and decorated with animals and plant scrolls. The figural similarities of birds and quadrupeds at Crophthorne and Acton Beauchamp, and the comparable plant scroll, is suggestive that both were the product of one hand, a peripatetic sculptor moving between two closely related ecclesiastical institutions. It is likely that the same sculptor worked on the Wroxeter cross-shaft and the same style has also been found at Gloucester, perhaps reflecting a regional workshop.

Figural sculpture certainly occurs, as on the eighth-century Lypiatt Cross near Bisley (Gloucestershire) where four tall figures standing below a round-headed arch have been interpreted as 'Christ the Teacher' supported by the Evangelists. Together with important sculpture in the church at Deerhurst there are early-ninth-century figural survivals like that from Upton Bishop (Herefordshire), the Worcestershire Lechmere Stone showing Christ with a gaunt, skull-like face, and the Newent cross-shaft depicting Adam and Eve and the sacrifice of Isaac. These suggest sculptural influences spreading westwards from Breedon-on-the-Hill and elsewhere.

A significant development of the ninth century was the introduction of the round shaft. Perhaps a Christian version of the Roman triumphal



Eighth-century striding birds and quadrupeds decorate The Priory Church at Breedon in Leicestershire.

column, of circular section and columnar form, a hybrid version combining a circular lower section with an upper square section was more common.

Described as an 'unparalleled' monument, this innovation is exemplified by the Wolverhampton round shaft dating to the late-ninth or tenth century. Now standing at five metres, it reflects influences from the south of England and Carolingian Europe. The lower sections of the shaft are decorated with cable moulding, lozenge-shaped panels with characteristically Mercian 'Anglian beasts', foliage, and bird and beast carvings. The similarity in motifs suggests that ninth-century metalwork may have provided a model for the decoration of the shaft, perhaps some kind of processional cross with applied metalwork plaques.

A Mercian Tradition?

The expertise, wealth and sumptuous products of eighth- and ninth-century Mercia are evident, but to what extent was there a Mercian style or tradition? The longevity of stylistic traits seen at Upton Bishop, spanning from the Roman to the Romanesque, suggests a long-lived local tradition which may well have provided a route for the transmission of motifs that first appear in Jarrow in the late-seventh century and then reappear over four-hundred years later in local Romanesque sculpture. ●

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Further Reading

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Richard Bryant, *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, Volume X. The Western Midlands* (British Academy, Oxford University Press, 2012).

John Hunt, 'A figure sculpture at Upton Bishop, Herefordshire: continuity and revival in early medieval sculpture', *Antiquaries Journal*, LXXXIX, 2009, pp. 179-214.

Leslie Webster & Janet Backhouse (eds), *The Making of England. Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900* (British Museum Press, 1991).

David M Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Art: From the Seventh Century to the Norman Conquest* (British Museum Press, 1991).

Manuscripts of Lichfield Cathedral at <https://lichfield.as.uky.edu/>

Treasures of the Anglo-Saxons at www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00t6xzx