SYMBOLISM IN NORMAN SCULPTURE AT QUENINGTON, GLOUCESTERSHIRE.[1]

By Miss JOSEPHINE KNOWLES.

In a remote corner of Gloucestershire, tucked away on an outlying spur of the Cotswold Hills, lies the little Norman church of Quenington, and probably on account of this very remoteness it has escaped the notice of the chronicler and historian.

This church is worth more than a passing notice, for it possesses an unique specimen of symbolical Gothic carving, namely, the First Person of the Trinity represented as a small sun with distinct face and rays. This representation of a sun is the only one extant in England, the most diligent search having failed to reveal another.

This peculiar symbolical carving presents one of the most interesting features of mediaeval church architecture, not only for its extreme rarity, but for the more or less mystery in which it is shrouded.

With the church of Quenington itself we have nothing to do, the limited space of this article preventing all but the briefest outline of its history.

Samuel Lysons writes in 1790 :

"This building bears evident marks of antiquity, although it appears to have undergone considerable alterations within the last two centuries. The original round-headed windows may still be traced, although they are now either walled up, or changed into sharp pointed or square ones. The south doorway is 5 feet 11 inches in height, and 9 feet 11 inches wide. The arch of it is semi-circular and ornamented with a variety of mouldings, wherein plainly appears a corruption of the Roman style.

"The interior part of the arch is ornamented with a zig-zag moulding, so constantly to be seen in works of this kind. Within this and over the door are several figures rudely carved in bas-relief, amongst which is the Virgin Mary, who holds a dove, and the Angel, Eagle, winged Bull and Lion, the four evangelists, who are accompanied by scrolls. On one side is the figure of a church in which it may be remarked that the arches are circular and that the spire is covered with shingle. From the style of the ornaments of these doorways

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one may conclude that this building was erected soon after the conquest, when the Normans introduced a more sumptuous style of architecture.

"The tympanum of the north doorway has a great variety of ornaments, amongst which the zig-zag and lozenge moulding are most conspicuous.[1] Over the door is the figure of the Saviour trampling on the Devil bound hand and foot, while he thrusts the cross into his mouth (this cross has no banner attached to it). There are also three saints in praying attitude, one of which seems to be escaping from a serpent's mouth. Over them is a sun with rays representing God the Father, and above the doorway is a ram's head much mutilated."

Then he goes on to say :

"The Manor of Quenington was granted by William the Conqueror to Walter de Laci, one of his Norman followers, and descended to his son Roger, who is said to have been in so great favour with the Conqueror that he bestowed on him one hundred and sixteen manors, of which twenty were in Gloucestershire."

He finishes by saying :

"It is not improbable that this Church was erected at the expense of father or son."

This de Lacey family is mentioned in the Doomesday Book of 1084. The Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem in England held Quenington by gift of Agnes de Lacey and her daughter, which was confirmed by King John, and a further extract from Doomesday Book states that "Quenintone in Brietwoldsberg Hundred contained 8 Hides."

But nevertheless, I feel inclined to ascribe the date of Quenington church to 1100 and not 1000, as all the rich detail in architectural carvings belong to the time of Stephen and Henry II. It must have struck everyone who has studied twelfth century buildings, what a profusion of detail their builders crammed into every remote corner and inaccessible buttress. The two doorways of Quenington Church are very rich in carvings, and the reason the body of the church is not equally so, is because it has been restored at a later date. The doorways however being so fine, were mercifully left untouched.

[1] Another curious archaeological fact is that the lozenge or triangular carving was always reserved for decorations around the First Person of the Trinity. This lozenge style surrounds this tympanum in a very marked and beautiful way.

This is enough to show the origin of the church. I will now deal with the stone carvings of the tympanum over the north doorway, the subject of which is the "Harrowing of Hell." This is defined in Wedgwood's *Dictionary of Etymology* as being "the triumphant expedition of Christ after the Crucifixion when He brought away the souls of the righteous who had died and been held in Hell since the beginning of the world."

"Harrow" means to rob or spoil. In a Saxon MS. of the eleventh century there is this inscription, "Christ Harrows Hell!"

This subject forms one of a regular series and is found in mediaeval art from the eleventh century onwards. It also occurs in Byzantine mosaics.

The Harrowing of Hell was the subject of mediaeval mystery plays. "'This,' its editor observes, 'is believed to be the most ancient production in a dramatic form in our language. The manuscript from which it is now printed is on vellum, and is certainly as old as the reign of Edward III. if not older. It probably formed one of a series of performances of the same kind founded upon Scripture history.' It consists of a prologue, epilogue, and intermediate dialogue of nine persons, Dominus, Sathan, Adam, Eve, etc. Independently of the alleged age of the manuscript itself, the language will hardly be thought later than 1350." Hallam, *Literature of Europe*, 4th Edition, Vol. I, page 213.

Now although this subject of the Harrowing of Hell forms one of a series in mediaeval art, it is by no means as common as many of the other subjects; in fact, the only other authentic instances of the Harrowing of Hell occur in a tympanum in Lincoln Cathedral, a twelfth century painting at Chaldon in Surrey, in a tympanum at Beckford, and in a three-coloured and illuminated MS. in the British Museum. However, the remarkable part of the Quenington carving is this: that with the exception of one MS. this Gloucestershire Church contains the only representation of the sun symbolizing God the Father. The most diligent search has failed to reveal any other authentic instances of this subject in England. On the Continent it occurs more frequently, as I shall show later.

The British Museum MS. which contains this sun can with certainty be dated between 1121 and 1173; it represents Christ with a bannered cross[1] which He thrusts into the mouth of a huge green monster (these dragons representing Hell were always painted dark green), the mouth being filled with people whom He is rescuing. An angel accompanies Him, while in the upper right-hand corner is a small sun with rays and a very distinct face. In the foreground is Satan lying bound hand and foot with the same rings (to which I shall refer later) as the rings on the devil in Quenington Church.

It is assumed that this MS. was painted at Winchester, and that it is perhaps copied from pictures brought from Italy.

In another eleventh century MS. the figure of Christ is this time without a cross, but the devil in the foreground is bound again with the same peculiar double rings. There is no sun in this one nor in the other MS., painted on a long scroll, and of twelfth century date. In this the dragon is as usual dark green, and neither in the Surrey painting nor the Beckford tympanum nor the Lincoln tympanum does the sun occur. Thus we see that with the exception of the MS. in the British Museum, the little Gloucestershire Church contains what is really a unique specimen of mediaeval symbolism.

To trace the origin and history of symbolical representations of God the Father would be a work of great scope if it were intended to include all foreign specimens of this order. But all attempts at explaining mediaeval symbolism from a twentieth century point of view is certain to end in failure. Before the Reformation, science did not exist in the modern sense of the word, and all learning was turned into a religious channel. The cathedrals and churches of the Middle Ages were not only places of worship and the abodes of monks, but they were also the outward form of expression of the popular mind, which instead of being thrown out into hymns and sermons as in our time, found expression in the magnificent Gothic architecture of that period.

[1] This is all the more curious as the cross which Christ carried was never bannered until the thirteenth century. However, this MS. being undoubtedly a copy of Italian pictures, bears out the fact that art in Italy was in advance of that in England.

Goethe calls this a petrified religion. Mr. Romilly Allen says, in *Christian Symbolism in Great Britain and Ireland*,

"That all attempts to symbolise the Creator except in the most abstract manner was considered unscriptural. The early Christians during the first four centuries adhered to this view of the case, and the First Person of the Trinity was always symbolised by a hand. But from the ninth century onwards the difficulty of approaching this sacred subject was avoided by merging the identity of God the Father in that of God the Son, and very often except for the surroundings there is no way of telling which is intended."

But the rank assigned to God the Father in early Christian monuments is frequently not very honourable, the Son taking precedence over Him. The precedence granted to one Person over another has a peculiar signification thus:

"The left hand is inferior to the right. Likewise the left side of a picture is inferior in position to the right. The centre is more honourable than the circumference. The Bible has always been placed on the left and the Gospel on the right. While in carvings and pictures the figures of saints militant are below, and these same saints when seen after death are pictured above triumphant and admitted into Paradise. The centre again is more honorable than the circumference. In a rose window of stained glass the centre is always assigned to the Creator or Virgin Mary, then follow the different orders commencing with the Seraphims, and closing with the angels and saintly orders at the extreme edge. . . .

"As to the reason why the First Person of the Trinity was often represented in small and trivial fashion we may attribute it to the following causes: one was probably a hatred felt by the Gnostics for God the Father and a dread lest they should appear to recall the idea of Jupiter or to offer a pagan idol to the ignorant Christians; another cause might be an absence of any visible manifestations of Jehovah, and lastly the difficulty all artists must have felt in executing so sublime an image."

Even as late as the twelfth century no complete portraits of God the Father are to be seen. Very often they depicted Him by a hand issuing from the clouds, sometimes darting rays from each finger, as though a living sun. This design of hand with sun's rays is very old. A Greek miniature of the tenth century shows the hand in the clouds in a blessing attitude.

Didron in his *Christian Iconograph* affirms that the Greek benediction differs in certain points from the Latin,

consequently the Greek form of benediction if observed on a Latin figure or *vice versâ* would be of great historical interest, and also as regards the Last Judgement, the Greek Church represents the dead as emerging from the mouths of beasts, and as this so often occurs in Norman sculpture it is most interesting to trace it from the Greek.

In French Church history we find that previous to the eleventh century the presence of the Father was always intimated by a hand extending from the clouds, and in the twelfth century the face of God is first introduced.

An illustration in the Italian *Speculum humanae salvationis*, which is held to belong to Giotto, gives a representation of the Creator partially seen through the clouds driving Lucifer downwards with a motion of His hand. This only shows a head with nimbus and one arm.

Hands thus decorated with the nimbus formed the earliest symbolic representations of the Father. An example of the ninth century has the two first fingers outstretched surmounted by an auriole containing sun's rays, and also the branches of a cross. This is interesting on account of the peculiar direction of these branches, the rays seem attached in groups of four to the line of circumference.

There is in Chartres Cathedral a painting on glass representing the History of Charlemagne and the death of Roland. Here the hand of God is seen extended and without a nimbus. It is appearing to Roland, who is cleaving the rock with his good sword Durandal. This painting belongs to the thirteenth century. Also Maya the Hindoo goddess is represented in a large nimbus, which is striated with luminous rays corresponding exactly with the cross lines in the Divine nimbus of Christian mythology.

In the Roman Catholic countries of Europe the Creator is often represented as a Pope wearing a tiara. "But," says M. Didron, "in England where the Pope has long been held in low 'esteem' it was impossible to represent Him with the insignia of papacy."

It is curious to observe how profoundly and yet lucidly works of art reflect the ideas of the epoch in which they were executed.

A most brilliant example of the name Jehovah in Hebrew characters inscribed in a triangle surrounded by sun's rays occurs in some beautiful tapestry of the sixteenth century in the Cathedral of Sens. The Cathedrals of Paris, Rheims, and Chartres have many representations of God the Father, in fact, all over France and catholic Europe these representations are common.

In an Italian miniature of the thirteenth century an angel is representing as assisting the Creator in moulding the clay out of which the first man was made ; it is not a solitary instance of this subject, for in the north porch of the Cathedral of Chartres the Creator is assisting an angel with whom He appears to be in consultation. Up to the fifth or sixth century the Church was resolved to restrain the zeal of Christian artists and to prevent them from representing the Deity in sculpture and painting.

We may quote here the case of St. John Damascenus, who positively declares that the Divine nature ought not to be represented. The great theologian says :

Dei, qui est incorporeus invisibilis a materia remotissimus figurae expers incircumscriptus et incomprehensibilis, imago nulla fieri potest. Nam quomodo illud quod in aspectum non cadit imago representarit.

Thus even Damascenus, so bold in defending the images of Christ, is restrictive with regard to those of the Father.

Such circumstances as these would account for the rarity of these portraits, as the artists furthermore did not know how to represent the Creator and knew not what form to attribute to Him.

In short, Gnosticism on the one hand and theological dogmas on the other, were the potent causes for the extreme rarity of the portraits of God the Father.

In an old French MS. of uncertain date and authorship occurs the subject of the Harrowing of Hell. It is very similar to that of Quenington but more elaborate. It shows Christ with a bannered cross saving the souls out of the mouth of the conventional dragon. An interesting feature of these scenes is the cross which may be either that of the Resurrection or of the Passion. The former occurs in the Harrowing of Hell, and after

the thirteenth century this cross had a banner attached to it.

Of the three figures that are issuing out of the dragon's mouth in the Quenington tympanum the first is considered by some to be Adam. I cannot see what authority there is for assuming this; I am much more inclined to think that they are all three nameless saints.

According to Mr. Romilly Allen the most interesting peculiarity in the Quenington sculpture is the way in which the Devil's hands and feet are bound.

This is done by a ring interlaced through the limbs, and Mr. Allen considers that it affords a connecting link between the symbolism of the pre-Norman crosses and that of the sculpture of the twelfth century. It is certainly to be seen most distinctly in the illuminated MS. to which I have already referred.

It is certainly remarkable that a symbolical carving of such rarity should have so completely escaped the trail of the journalist, when we consider that there are so few spots unrecorded and unvisited by him.

However, this little Gloucestershire corner is one of these rare spots, nor will the bringing of these carvings into prominence disturb the uninterrupted peace of this village.