

TWO PANELS ON THE WIRKSWORTH SLAB

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INTRODUCTION

Among surviving Anglo-Saxon sculptures, one monument stands out as unique — the carved slab, 19.5 x 63 inches (0.5 x 1.6 metres) built into the north aisle of the church at Wirksworth, Derbyshire (Plate 1). The slab was found in 1820/21, almost two feet (c. 0.6 metre) beneath paving in front of the altar, its carved face downwards, covering a stone-built vault or grave. What makes it unique in Anglo-Saxon art is that it features a number of biblical or symbolic scenes in two long panels, placed one above the other and separated by a raised band. This superimposed series of figures is so reminiscent of late-Roman sarcophagi that Kurth (1945) suggested that the Wirksworth slab may originally have been the lid of a sarcophagus. However, it is not impossible that the slab could have acted as part of a low stone screen separating the altar area from the faithful in some early predecessor of the present church; and the choice of biblical subjects suggests an early-medieval rather than a late-Roman date.

The lower right-hand edge of the slab is straight and therefore, one may presume, original; the jagged left-hand edge suggests that the slab once extended further in this direction. Because two scenes placed one above the other — *The Cross surmounted by the Lamb of God* in the upper register and *The Ascension* beneath it — create an obvious central axis, it is likely that the stone originally extended as far to the left of the Cross as it still does to the right of it, thus giving a maximum pristine length of about 82 inches (2.08 metres). We may therefore assume that only one scene is missing from each of the registers.

Apart from the two axial scenes, the only other subjects to have been identified satisfactorily are *Christ washing the Disciples' feet* on the extreme left of the upper register, and *The Annunciation to the Virgin* immediately to the right of *The Ascension* in the lower register. The remaining scenes have been subject to a variety of interpretations (Cockerton, 1962; Kurth, 1945; Marucchi, 1924); it is the purpose of this paper to offer comparable material which may assist in clarifying the subject matter of at least two of the disputed panels — those on the extreme left and right respectively of the lower register.

DISCUSSION

1. The Nativity and Washing of the Infant Christ (Plate 1: bottom left)

The scene on the bottom left of the slab is incomplete. Viewed from top to bottom, the surviving details consist of: the upper part of a human figure resting its hand on a diagonally-placed frame in which another, smaller, figure lies; the busts of three figures placed side by side; a horizontal rib; and three vertical designs which may, perhaps, be interpreted as stylised plant ornamentation, with rising and falling branches.

Cockerton (1962: 11f) suggested that the whole scene represented the *Anastasis* (the Resurrection, involving a descent into Hades). Almost forty years earlier, Marucchi (1924: 154) had proposed that the upper section represented the first moment of the Resurrection, with the angel coming to the tomb, and that the three lower figures should therefore be seen as the three women at the Sepulchre. But Saxl and Kurth (Kurth, 1945: 117 and n. 16) were surely more correct in interpreting the top portion as part of a *Nativity* scene. Saxl tentatively identified the upper left-hand figure as the unbelieving midwife grasping the cover of the cradle with her withered hand; Kurth proposed that it was more likely to represent the Virgin. Support for the



Plate 1 The carved stone slab in the church at Wirksworth, Derbyshire (*Photograph George Zarnecki, by courtesy of the Courtauld Institute*)

latter is forthcoming in a *Nativity* depicted on fol. 6 v of the Armenian Gospels of 1057, formerly in the monastery of Etchmiadzin and now in the Matenadaran (Mastotz Institute of Ancient Manuscripts), in the Armenian capital, Erevan (Ms. 3784 — formerly Ms. G.362 in the Library at Etchmiadzin).

On the bottom right of the illustration (Plate 2) we see the Virgin placing both hands on the corner of the cradle containing the wrapped figure of the Christ child, in a composition sufficiently resembling that on the Derbyshire slab to justify Kurth's identification of the uppermost figure of the Wirksworth scene as the Virgin.

The placing of the Virgin's legs diagonally away from the cradle, and the figure of Joseph further to the left, in the manuscript depiction may give us a clue as to what was on at least part of the missing section of the slab.

But this Armenian depiction is also of importance in providing us with a probable identification for the three figures beneath the Wirksworth *Nativity*, which Kurth (1945: 117) thought likely to be the Magi. The Armenian miniature shows beneath the cradle a three-figure group representing the Christ child with crossed legs being bathed in a tub by the two midwives known from the Apocryphal Gospels (James, 1953: 46f; cf. Schiller, 1971: 63ff). Seated on the left is the unbelieving Salome (whom Saxl associated with the upper figure at Wirksworth), stretching forth her hand towards the child. *The Washing of the Christ child* is mentioned in only one of the Apocrypha, the Arabian Gospel of the Childhood of Christ (Schiller, 1971: 64). However, it frequently forms an integral part of *Nativity* illustrations in middle Byzantine art (Schiller, 1971: 66), and it also figures in western art of the eighth and ninth centuries. As examples one may cite the fragmentary mosaic of Pope John VII (705-707) from the old basilica of St. Peter's in Rome, now in the Vatican grottoes (Nordhagen, 1965: pl. XVIII, XXa), the frescoes at Castelseprio (Bognetti *et al.*, 1948: tav. XLVIII, L), and at San Vincenzo al Volturno (c. 840-850) (Belting, 1968: Taf. XXVI, Abb. 48; 196, fig. 50), as well as the enamelled cross from the Treasury of the Cappella Sancta Sanctorum in the Vatican (Inv. no. 1216), dating from the reign of Pope Pascal I (817-824) (Legner, 1985). The same scene occurs (albeit with only one



Plate 2 Fol. 6 v of the Gospels from Etchmiadzin, Ms. 3784 in the Matenadaran, Erivan, showing *The Nativity* and *The Washing of the Christ child* on the bottom right (Photograph by courtesy of the Matenadaran)

midwife) on an (?)eighth/ninth century carved stone slab at Zadar in Yugoslavia, where the long tubular folds on the garments of the figures in a cycle of scenes from the childhood of Christ form a striking stylistic parallel to those on the lower register of the Wirksworth carving (Kutzli, 1974: 88, Bild 69). Further north, the *Washing* makes an appearance with the *Nativity* in a decorated initial in the Sacramentary of Drogo (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms. lat. 9428, fol. 24 v), of c. 830 or 855 (Schiller, 1971: fig. 160); by itself, without the *Nativity*, it is featured on a ninth/tenth century fresco at St. Pierre-les-Églises (Vienne) (Deschamps, 1951: tav. CCVIII-CCIX), and on a panel on the east face of the broken High Cross at Kells, in the Irish county of Meath (Roe, 1959: pl. XV, panel 3; cf. 49).

On the basis of these parallels, it seems likely that the three figures beneath the *Nativity* on the Wirksworth slab are those of the Christ child flanked by the two midwives; that all three figures are shown the same size was perhaps due to the craftsman's misunderstanding of the model from which he was working. The horizontal bar beneath them could then be taken as the rim of the bath-tub, with the vertical design beneath as decoration on the front of the tub.

2. The Adoration of the Magi (Plate 1: bottom right)

In the bottom right-hand portion of the lower register of the Wirksworth slab we find a scene showing a figure facing half-left, holding up a child bearing a scroll in its left hand and half-facing back towards the figure holding it. Beneath these two is a concave frame, which rises up on the right behind the larger figure. The group is approached from the left by three long-robed figures with raised right forearms, that on the right placing its hand on the arm of the child next to it. Marucchi (1924: 156f) saw this scene as representing St. Peter's departure from Joppa; Cockerton (1962: 14f) believed it to be *The Mission to the Gentiles*, while Kurth (1945: 117)

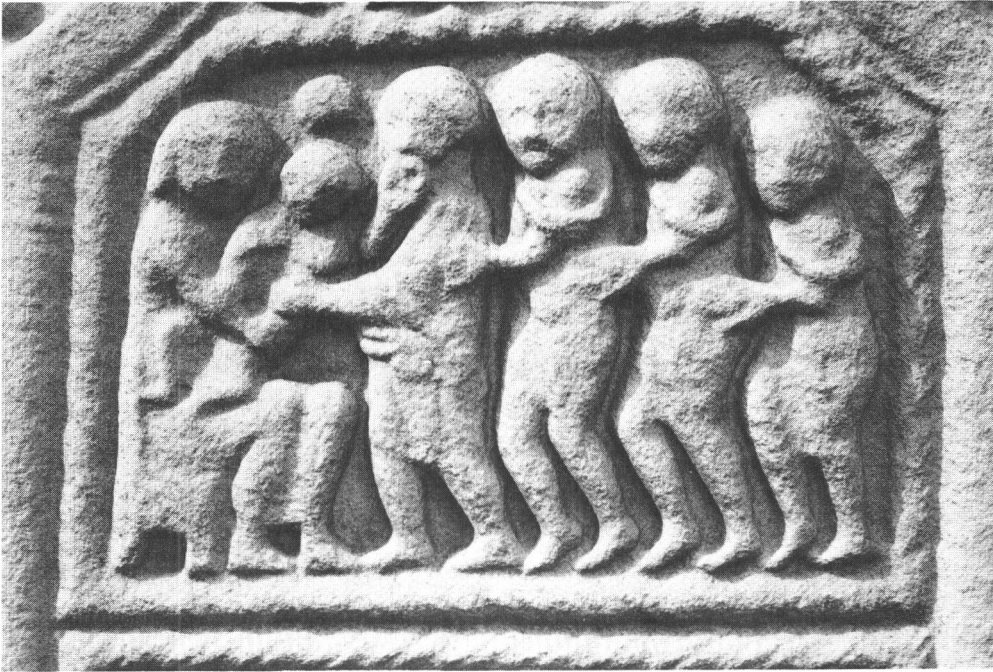


Plate 3 *The Adoration of the Magi* on Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice (Photograph P. Harbison)

identified it as *The Presentation in the Temple* (taking the approaching figures to be Joseph, Anne and the Virgin).

However, a strikingly similar composition is found on another Irish High Cross, that of Muiredach at Monasterboice in Co. Louth (Plate 3), where it is generally accepted as representing *The Adoration of the Magi*. Here we find the Virgin on the left, seated in a chair reminiscent of the concave frame at Wirksworth. She holds the Christ child diagonally in front of her (not facing the Magi, as is more usual), with the child half-looking back towards her, as at Wirksworth (and as found on some fourth century Roman sarcophagi: cf. Schiller, 1971: figs. 249, 254). At Monasterboice it is not clear if the Christ child holds a scroll, but elsewhere he is occasionally found holding one, as in the Stuttgart Psalter (Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart, cod. 23, fol. 84 r) of c. 830 (Schiller, 1971: fig. 264). Monasterboice differs from Wirksworth and other representations of the scene in having an additional figure approaching the Virgin and child, but it does have one feature for which Wirksworth seems to offer the only satisfactory parallel: the front figure placing its hand on Christ's arm. Its resemblance to Monasterboice suggests that the Wirksworth scene also depicts *The Adoration of the Magi*, an interpretation which, taking into account *The Annunciation* immediately adjoining it, *The Nativity* with *The Washing of the Christ Child* on the far left, and the possible *Massacre of the Innocents* on the top right (Kurth, 1945: 117), makes the Wirksworth slab the most extensive group of scenes from a Childhood of Christ cycle known from Anglo-Saxon England.

The close similarity of some of the details on the Monasterboice parallel adduced here has an obvious relevance for the dating of the Wirksworth slab, which has varied from the seventh to the tenth century (Kurth, 1945: 114). Muiredach's Cross is often dated to the tenth century (e.g. Henry, 1967: 138f); however, its inscription allows it to be ascribed equally well to the ninth (Harbison, 1979: 187). Furthermore, its iconography, and that of a number of other Irish High Crosses with biblical scenes carved in high relief, fits best into the narrative cycles known from

the second and third quarters of the ninth century on the Continent (Harbison, 1984). A ninth/tenth century date would seem most appropriate, therefore, for the Wirksworth slab.

It seems unlikely that the Magi scene at Monasterboice was copied from that of Wirksworth, or *vice versa*. The great similarity in some of their iconographical details suggests rather that both are derived from a common tradition whose origins lay close to the shores of the Mediterranean, and which may also have supplied some of the details for the Armenian *Washing* scene.

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