

A new interpretation of the Sculpted Tympanum of All Saints Church, Pitsford

by

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SUMMARY

The carving on the tympanum of All Saints Church, Pitsford is one of a group of rare 12th-century English sculptures depicting Christ's Redemption of mankind. The scene is Christ's Descent into Hades to destroy Death, here personified by Behemoth, the twin figure of Leviathan. The main literary source of these carvings is the Ransom Theory as expounded by Pope Gregory the Great in his lengthy commentary on the Book of Job, the Moralia in Job completed shortly before 597. At the end of the 12th century the Ransom Theory was abandoned in favour of Anselm's exposition of the Doctrine of the Atonement. Consequently, carvings depicting the Ransom theory, such as the Pitsford tympanum, vanished for ever from the repertoire of ecclesiastical sculpture, and the scenes and characters depicted are now either a source of mystery or are reinterpreted to fit later doctrines. It is to be hoped that the unique historical importance of the whole surviving corpus of 12th-century English sculpture will become more widely recognised and that this heritage will be properly preserved for posterity.

INTRODUCTION

Mary Curtis Webb spent many years researching the literary sources of three 12th-century sculptures: the tympanum of Pitsford Church, Northamptonshire, the lintel of Dinton Church, Buckinghamshire and the font of Hampstead Norreys, Berkshire now in the church of Stone, Buckinghamshire. Although she intended to publish her findings, the accumulation of evidence delayed the completion of her work and she died in 1987 with it unfinished. Her daughter Gillian Greenwood, with the help of others, finally brought this important work to completion in 2010 under the title: *Ideas and Images in Twelfth Century Sculpture*, as a private publication. Not only is it a memorial to her mother, but it brings much needed recognition to these rare sculptures and the urgent need for their preservation. Mary Curtis Webb, when asked what the book's title would be said, she had not thought of a short form of words, but the ground covered was, 'the transmission of ideas and their visual images from the first to the twelfth centuries.'

This article has been abstracted from the book by



Fig 1 All Saints' Church, Pitsford

Gillian Greenwood to focus on the tympanum at Pitsford Church.

The village of Pitsford lies to the north of Northampton, just to the east of the A508 to Market Harborough (NGR SP754682). Although the village is mentioned by name in Domesday as *Pitesford* and *Pidesford*, the first known record of a church at Pitsford is in 1218 when the first rector took up office. The oldest part of the church is the tower, of at least 13th century date, and the north aisle. In 1867 the church was substantially rebuilt and enlarged as it was in a bad state of repair (Fig 1). At this time the tympanum and the doorway were moved from their original site to their present position over the south door, within the porch (Trott 2010).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The figures have been provided by the author, with the exception of figures 1, 2, 7 and 9, showing Pitsford church and the tympanum. These images are by the editor, Andy Chapman, who would like to thank the Churchwarden Mrs Margaret Brown, for providing access to the church to photograph the tympanum.

THE RANSOM THEORY

The carving on the tympanum of All Saints' Church, Pitsford is one of a group of rare 12th-century English sculptures depicting Christ's Redemption of mankind. The scene is Christ's Descent into Hades to destroy

Death, here personified by Behemoth, the twin figure of Leviathan (Fig 2).

The main literary source of these carvings is the Ransom Theory as expounded by Pope Gregory the Great in his lengthy commentary on the Book of Job, the *Moralia in Job* completed shortly before AD 597. Another source was the popular apocryphal *Gospel of Nicodemus* which had been known in England since the days of Bede.

The Ransom Theory was an early attempt by churchmen to explain why God became incarnate. The theory had been developed by the Alexandrians, including Origen (died c AD 254) and the theme had been in common currency since the 3rd century. However, it was transmitted most fully in the Latin west by Gregory the Great. It has been estimated that the *Moralia in Job* was the most widely read book outside the scriptures throughout the early Middle Ages and copies were kept in most monastic libraries – sometimes in duplicate or more – in spite of its inordinate length.

Nevertheless, after almost a thousand years of its general acceptance throughout the Church, the theory was finally challenged, first by Anselm of Canterbury in favour of the doctrine of the Atonement and later by Abelard, and has since been largely forgotten.

The Ransom Theory relates how the devil, who had tricked Adam into eating the forbidden fruit, was himself deceived by God who, like a fisherman, hooked him, using Jesus as bait. Leviathan, unaware that the human flesh offered was divine, was caught on 'the Hook of Divinity' (*Moralia in Job*) thereby bringing upon



Fig 2 Pitsford, showing the tympanum over the south door

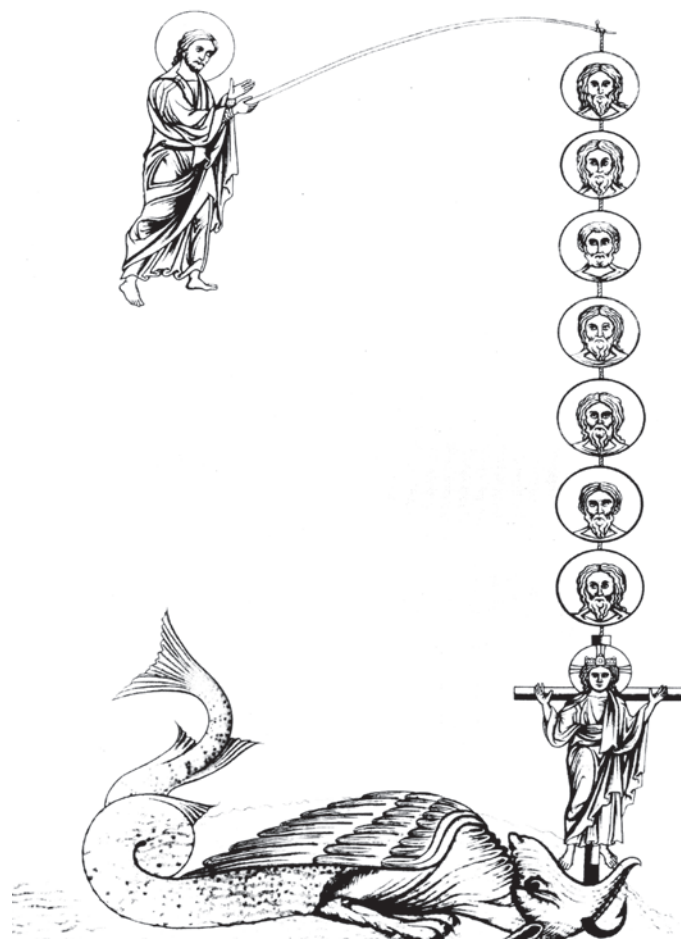


Fig 3 The deception of the Devil: An illustration from the *Hortus Deliciarum* of Abbess Herrad of Landsberg, showing the snaring of Leviathan by the bait of flesh on the hook of Divinity

himself his own destruction. This event was wonderfully illustrated in Abbess Herrad's book, *Hortus Delicarum*, written in Alsace after 1167 (Fig 3). Based on the *Moralia in Job*, the line is shown as the lineage of Jesus who stands robed and crowned, freely and unbound upon the cross. The drawing of Leviathan is closely paralleled in the sculptured figure on the lintel of the parish church of Dinton, Buckinghamshire (Fig 4).

Though hard to believe, it appears that in the Winchester Psalter and on the carved lintel of Dinton parish church, Buckinghamshire, Christ is depicted as laughing. 'I am a

worm and no man. All that see me laugh me to scorn ...' (Psalm 22, 6-7). Leviathan (Death) is mocked in his turn by the laughing Christ, who thrusts his Cross into the monster's jaws. The wings of his heavenly descent are outspread while He holds in His hands the worm (Figs 4 and 5).

These sculptures, all illustrating scenes from the Ransom Theory, were carved by craftsmen who were evidently well familiar with their literary source even though they themselves probably never learned to read from a book. Theirs was a visual vernacular. Each craftsman, having



Fig 4 Twelfth-century sculptured lintel at Dinton Parish Church, Buckinghamshire



Fig 5 The wriggling worm in the hand of the winged and laughing Christ (detail from Dinton lintel)

been taught the literary source by the parish priest, used his own imagination and understanding as he illustrated the scenes from the Ransom Theory in minute and careful detail. To a reader of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job* or of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* this is immediately very clear. The carver selects details from one or the other account and illustrates them exactly, so that his work may be seen as a theological statement. So it is understandable that depictions of the Ransom Theory vary. Some carvings are easier to interpret than others: for example, the winged figure on the Hoveringham tympanum in Leicestershire can be immediately identified as Christ by the Hand of God pointing down on him and by the Lamb of God standing behind him, whereas on the Southwell Minster tympanum in Nottinghamshire we see David, the prototype of Christ, rescuing the lamb from the lion's mouth. On the lintel of Dinton in Buckinghamshire and at Flax Bourton, Somerset we are shown the winged Christ fighting Leviathan with his Cross, thrusting it down the throat of the monster (Fig 6).

At Pitsford, however, we have to interpret the scene by comparing it with other sculptures and manuscript illustrations. The theme of the Pitsford tympanum may be summarised as follows, but its details are explicable only by reference to the text of Gregory's commentary on the Book of Job, the *Moralia in Job*.

On the right stands Christ, who has flown down from heaven and has now discarded his wings. His back is turned towards the observer while he swings the weapon in his right hand to deliver a blow at his enemy. This is Behemoth, the counterpart of Leviathan from the Book of Job. His weapon, however, is not a sword but a traditional single-bladed butcher's knife. The carver, in following Gregory's commentary, has shown Behemoth 'raised up on the birds of his pride' in contrast to the humble stance of the Christ who stands upon the ground. The features of Behemoth correspond closely with those of Leviathan on the Dinton lintel and his foliated tail, 'raised like a cedar,' is beaded all along its length. In



Fig 6 The tympanum in Flax Bourton Church, Somerset, showing the winged figure of Christ descending to stop the mouth of Death (Leviathan) with his cross and flourishing the sword with which he will dismember Leviathan

the background is a leafless palm tree with three small circles (referring to the Trinity) carved at the root. This is the Tree of Life. Its trunk is being attacked by one of the evil birds supporting Behemoth. The sculptor shows the left hand of the Christ thrust into the very jaws of Death, for he is 'binding the tongue of Leviathan with a cord'. The three-fold cord is attached to the under-seam of his garment and its tasselled ends swirl beside him in the stress of the battle. The whole of this sculptured scene is enclosed within a framing rope which is threaded through 14 rectangular blocks on each side of which are nine small bosses in a three-by-three square (Figs 7 and 8).

Every detail of these carvings on the tympanum is derived from Pope Gregory's Commentary upon selected verses from the Book of Job. (Mary C Webb includes quotations in her book, these will be abbreviated here.)

THE THREE EVIL BIRDS WHICH SUPPORT BEHEMOTH

Wilt thou play with him as a bird? (Job 41.15)

Why is it that our adversary is first called Behemoth and afterwards Leviathan but is now compared to a bird ...? ... we learn more quickly the meaning of his names if we examine the craft of his cunning ... Sometimes, because through his indomitable pride he feigns to be an angel of light, he is a bird. For though he harasses mankind through his inexplicable skill in wickedness yet he especially tempts by three sins in order to subdue to himself some by lust and some by pride ... When it (the bird) saw our Redeemer was mortal in the flesh it was puffed up with greater haughtiness



Fig 7 The tympanum of All Saints Church, Pitsford, framed by the circular rope of a fisherman's trawl net with 14 floats

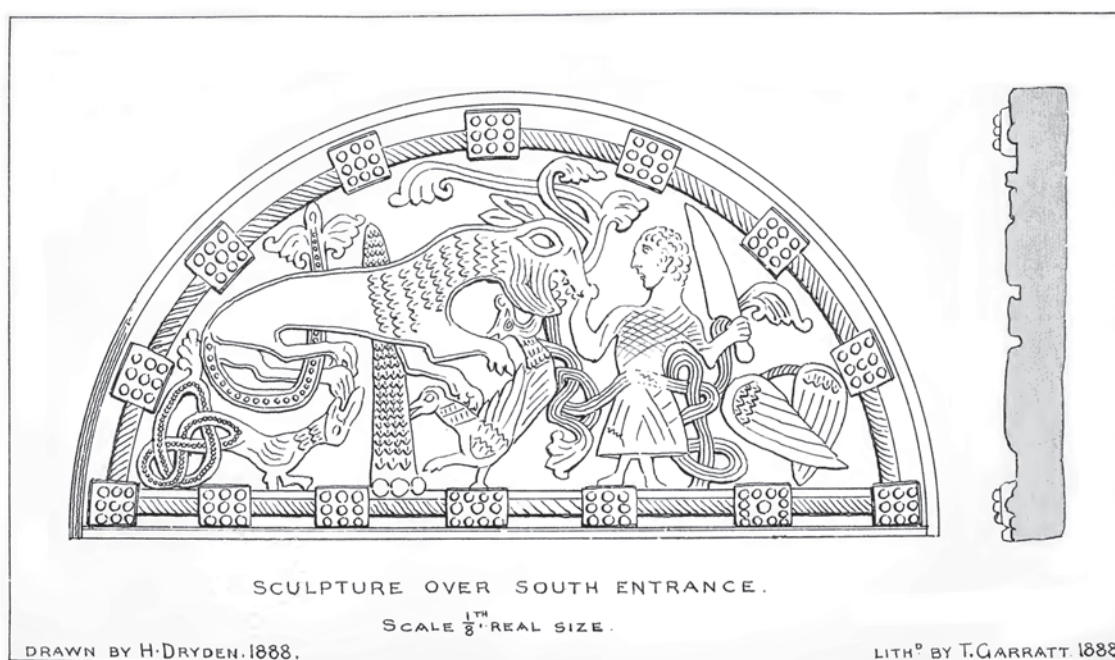


Fig 8 The tympanum of All Saints Church, Pitsford, as illustrated by Sir Henry Dryden in 1888 (Romilly Allen 1889)

of pride but where it raised itself up against its Maker with the wings of pride there it found the snare of its own death ... For the Lord in truth played with him as a bird when in the passion of his only begotten Son he showed him the bait but concealed the snare ... (Moralia in Job)

The sculptor has illustrated the three forms of temptation which, in the shape of three evil birds, uphold the body of Behemoth in his self deception and pride.

THE PAIR OF DISCARDED WINGS

The winged figure on the Pitsford tympanum has mistakenly been thought to depict St Michael, but in the Middle Ages it was not uncommon for holy souls and even for Christ to be depicted with wings, eg Dinton, Buckinghamshire; St Michael's, Flax Bourton; St Michael's, Hoveringham and Southwell Minster. The scene on the Pitsford tympanum depicts the furious battle in Hades between Christ, who has 'flown down

from heaven like a vulture' (*Moralia*) and Behemoth. But here Christ has discarded his wings and is fighting Behemoth, as a mortal man, standing with both feet on the ground.

In the *Moralia in Job* Gregory speaks of Christ as 'the Dear Bird from heaven' - and Christ was not uncommonly depicted as a vulture or an eagle. An example of this is the *In Principio* page of the *Floreffe* Bible where the 'Dear Bird' is shown resting in the lap of God the Father. The 'Dear Bird' is also seen as a symbol of Christ, one who accompanies him, as for example on the 12th-century font of Eardisley, Herefordshire where he is shown seated on Christ's shoulder, and on the font in the church of Stone, Buckinghamshire where he is shown assisting the fighting Christ by pecking the monster.

... rightly is the Mediator between God and man called a Vulture, who let himself drop from the regions of heaven to the lowest place ... He sought death amongst us who is deathless himself ... Now the eye of the Vulture was aiming at our resurrection ... The faithless Jews saw Him in a state of mortality ... they knew not how by his death he would destroy death ... they knew not the pathway of the Bird. (Moralia in Job)

THE WEAPON IN THE HAND OF THE CHRIST – THE BUTCHER'S KNIFE

His friends shall cut him in pieces:
The merchants shall divide him (Job 41.6 E.V.)

Thou hast broken the head of Leviathan in pieces, and hast given him to be meat for the people of Ethiopia (Psalm 74:14)

In Rabbinical texts the snaring of Leviathan was expected of the Messiah: 'The Holy One, blessed be he, will in time to come make a banquet of the flesh of Leviathan. ... Leviathan will be distributed and sold in the markets of Jerusalem' (*BT Baba Dathra* 75a).

On the Pitsford tympanum the Christ is shown wielding the traditional form of a butcher's knife, the handle of which is half the length of the blade. This is comparable with the knife wielded by Christ on the font in the church of Stone, Buckinghamshire.

THE QUILTED GARMENT WORN BY THE CHRIST

The sculptor has depicted the garment worn by the Christ-figure battling against Behemoth as the gambeson, the sole protective covering worn by the lowest ranks of Norman foot soldiers, often made of padded and quilted linen. The carver has taken care to show the trellis pattern of the quilted garment and even the under-arm seam into which the loose end of the three-fold cord is inserted.

The gambeson was mentioned by Guillaume le Breton who described the troops of Duke William, preparing for the fight, '*Plusors orent vestu gambais*'. Illustrations in contemporary manuscripts frequently show this trellis pattern covering the gambeson, indicating this quilting and examples are to be found in the 12th-

century carvings in the parish churches of Ruardene, Gloucestershire and Brinsop, Herefordshire.

LARGE EYE OF BEHEMOTH

In his eyes He will take him as with a hook (Job 40.19)

... the Lord teaches in what way Behemoth is to be destroyed...saying, 'In his eyes He will take him with a hook' The Ancient Enemy of mankind saw placed before him our Redeemer whom he confessed to know saying, 'What have we to do with Thee, thou Son of God? Art thou come to destroy us ...?'. He was therefore taken with a hook because he first knew whom to fear, yet afterwards feared not when he hungered for the death of His flesh as it were his bait. (Moralia in Job)

The sculptor has shown that despite the enormity of his wicked eye, (emphasised by Gregory in the *Moralia*) Behemoth is deceived as to the divine nature of his antagonist. For the Incarnate Christ has laid aside the wings of his heavenly descent and hidden them behind his mortal body as he fights on the earth as a mortal man.

THE BEADED DECORATION ON THE TAIL OF BEHEMOTH AND ON THE TAIL OF ONE OF HIS SUPPORTING BIRDS

He raiseth his tail like a cedar (Job 40.17)
A path will shine after him (Job 41:32 E.V.)

... the name Cedar means the lofty excellence of heavenly glory ... But what is meant by the tail of this Behemoth except the latter end of the ancient Enemy, that ruined man, called Antichrist? ... for as the cedar leaves behind all other trees in its increasing height, so AntiChrist, possessing in temporal things the glory of the world will surpass all men in the height of his honour and the power of his miracles ... what greater cruelty can spring up in these torments? ... he who tortures with scourges also glitters with miracles ... On this tail of Behemoth it is said by John that under the form of a dragon, his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. For stars to fall from heaven is for some, having abandoned the hope of heavenly things, to be eager under his guidance for the pursuit of secular glory. (Moralia in Job)

He is chief of the ways of God (Job 40.19)

Behemoth is said to have been chief of the ways of God ... He made him more eminent than the other angels ... Hence the prophet subjoins ... 'Every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, the topaz, the jasper and the chrysolite, the onyx and the beryl, the sapphire, the carbuncle and the emerald'. He mentions nine kinds of stones doubtless because there are nine orders of angels ... yet this Behemoth is described as being covered in them ... (Moralia in Job)

The beaded decoration then represents the glitter of jewels and the stars swept from the sky by the tail of the great Dragon (Revelation 12.4). The carver illustrates the jewels on the tail of Behemoth and on the tail feathers of the 'bird of pride' by a carefully carved row of beading.

CHRIST BINDS THE TONGUE OF BEHEMOTH WITH THE THREE-FOLD GIRDLE

Canst thou draw out Leviathan with fish-hook or press down his tongue with a cord? Canst thou put a rope into his nose or pierce his jaw through with a hook? (Job 41: 1, 2)

A three-fold cord is not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4.12).

Our Lord bound the tongue of Leviathan with a cord because He appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh and condemned all his erroneous preaching ... He bound his tongue with a cord because ... He swept away all the deceitful arguments from the hearts of His enemies. For when the Lord appears in the flesh the tongue of Leviathan is bound because when His Truth had become known those doctrines of falsehood were silenced. The Lord bound the tongue of Leviathan with the cord of His Incarnation. A three-fold cord is not easily broken because faith in Truth which is woven by the mouth of the preachers from a knowledge of the Trinity, remains firm in the Elect ... (Moralia in Job)

The carver has shown the left hand of Christ thrust upwards into the open jaws of Behemoth, but owing to the flaking of the surface of the stone at this point it is not possible to see whether he is actually 'binding the tongue with a cord'. Nevertheless, one end of the girdle attached to the gambeson seems to be entering the jaws and the three-fold nature of the cord is carefully emphasised by the carver.

THE LEAFLESS TREE OF LIFE

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will be green again and that the tender branches thereof will sprout forth. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth and the stock die in the ground, yet through the scent of water it will bud and bring forth foliage as when it was first planted... (Job 14.7-10)

The root of the righteous may be taken for... a human being... which same root waxes old in the earth when the natural frame of the flesh comes to nought but 'at the scent of water' it buds in that through the coming of the Holy Spirit it rises again and brings forth boughs as when it was first planted... He said that He himself was the green tree but we that are mere men are called the dry tree. And so there is hope of a tree if it be cut down that it will sprout again and even if He were able to be put to death by his Passion yet by the glory of His resurrection He came to the greenness of life again. His branches shoot in that the faithful

being multiplied by His resurrection grow out far and wide ... he was held as an object of scorn and contempt in that He was capable of being put to death in the flesh but at the 'scent of water' He budded ... Through the power of God his flesh after demise returned to life ... God (who is) a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost raised up to life the extinct flesh of his only begotten Son ... and it brought forth foliage as when it was first planted ... In comparison with which Tree what is every man but dust?... (Moralia in Job)

The Pitsford carver has condensed the meaning of this passage into the image of a leafless tree with three small circles at its root (Figs 8-10). A parallel example occurs in a 12th-century bestiary where the tree that is Christ is depicted with three conspicuous circles at its root, as described by the theologian Hugh of Saint-Victor (died c 1141). In the context of the *Moralia* these three circles clearly relate to Gregory's repetition of a common patristic statement that 'God who is Trinity raised up the extinct flesh of the only begotten Son, and it brought forth foliage as when it was first planted.'

THE ROPE WHICH FRAMES THE PITSFORD TYMPANUM

In this carefully carved fisherman's trawl line with floats for the support of nets, the sculptor is concerned with three things.

THE FIRST CONCERN

The sculptor bears in mind Gregory's commentary on the teaching of the Church about entry to the Kingdom of Heaven, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a net cast into the sea and gathering every kind of fishes.' (Matthew 13.47).

What is designed by nets, or a cabin of fishes, except the churches of the faithful, which makes one Catholic Church? ... The Church is rightly compared to a net cast into the sea gathering every kind of fishes because when cast into this gentile world it rejected no one but caught the wicked with the good, the proud with the humble, the angry with the gentle and the foolish with the wise. But by the skin of this Leviathan we understand the foolish and by his head the wise ones of his body. (Moralia in Job)

'Wilt thou fill the nets with his skin and the cabin of fishes with his head?' (Job 41.7)

As if in answer to Job, Gregory's Commentary confirms that everyone, regardless of the quality of lives led, will be gathered into one fishing net (upheld by the floats). The parish priest, using the carved tympanum as a preaching station, would be able to explain that in the Kingdom of Heaven it will be the despised, lowly and humble of this world who will enter the Kingdom, whereas those who were expecting to be permitted to enter will be put to shame.



Fig 9 Comparison of carvings: The Descent of Christ – Pitsford. Compare the monster at Pitsford with that at Dinton (Fig 10, below), “tails raised like a cedar”. Behind the monster is the leafless Tree of Life



Fig 10 Comparison of Carvings: The Descent of Christ – Dinton. The monsters are tempters who are already holding the fruit of the Tree of Life in their jaws. They are toothless because the man has not yet succumbed to their temptations but is titillated at the prospect

And the Lord, observing the proper order, rightly declared that He will fill these ‘nets’ or cabins of fishes (that is His Church) with his ‘skin’ first and afterwards with his ‘head’. Because He chose the weak that He might confound the strong afterwards. He chose in truth the foolish things of the world

to confound the wise. For He gathered together the unlearned first and philosophers afterwards; and He taught not fishermen by means of orators, but with wondrous power He subdued orators by means of fishermen. (Moralia in Job)

‘God chose the foolish of this world that he might put to shame them that are wise; and he chose the weak things of the world that he might put to shame the things that are strong.’ (1 Corinthians 1.27)

THE SECOND CONCERN

By following the suggestions in Gregory’s interpretation of the biblical texts we should arrive at the symbolic implications of the 14 rectangular blocks reminiscent of floats on a trawl net (Figs 7 and 8)

On each of these 14 blocks the sculptor has carved a series of nine small bosses in relief, arranged as three rows of three. The labour involved in the production of such insignificant details must have been out of all proportion to the decorative results and can only have been justified if some further symbolic reference was needed. However, the carver has epitomised with remarkable ingenuity the explanation provided by Gregory in his *Moralia*.

The Lord was moved at the penitence of Job when he prayed for his friends and the Lord added all that had been lost to Job two-fold...And he had 7 sons and 3 daughters...In all the land there were no women found as fair as the daughters of Job. And their father gave them their inheritance among their brethren... (Job 42.10, 13-17).

Those things that were lost were now restored to Job two-fold. But as many children were restored as he had lost. (Job 1.18-19). For he had 7 sons and 3 daughters. But he is now described as having 7 sons and 3 daughters in order that those who had been destroyed may be shown to be alive... For God added to Job double the number of children, to whom he afterwards restored 10 in the flesh but he reserved the 10 that had been lost in the hidden abode of souls. If anyone wishes as an intellectual being to put aside the chaff of the history and feed on the grain of the mysteries, it is necessary for him to learn our opinion... (Moralia in Job)

Mary Webb in *Ideas and Images in 12th Century Sculpture*, agrees that the stamina of even intellectual beings may excusably falter at this point! However, her précis of Gregory’s opinion suggests that God restored to Job his original seven sons and three daughters but retained them in the abode of souls. At the same time God gave to Job twice the number of his original children, namely 14 new sons and six new daughters. Nevertheless the last verses of the Book of Job are concerned only with the beauty and virtue of the three original daughters and the equality of their patrimony among their brethren while the seven original sons are not even mentioned again, for since they were retained in the abode of souls they could not have followed the virile example of their 14 new brethren who became great-grandfathers in the course of time.

Gregory now gives a long and detailed interpretation of virtues and names of the three original daughters, which led the carver to include them with their six new sisters. Their perfection was implicit in their names; *Dies*, *Casia* and *Cornu Stibii*, which Gregory interpreted as ‘The Light of Innocent Day’, ‘The Sweet Odour of

Sanctity’ and ‘The Song of Them that Rejoice’ and with names like that no man could be expected to ignore them. At this point the carver gave a final example of his ingenuity by representing their perfection in terms of the current, Pythagorean mathematics, in which the square and the cube represented the perfect numbers, discussed by Mary Webb (2010). Gregory had also remarked that ‘In secular knowledge the square and the cubic numbers are called ‘Perfect’, but we transcend all this knowledge by advancing through the loftiness of the Scriptures.’ (*Moralia*).

The Pitsford carver took the hint for he has displayed the ‘perfection’ of the daughters of Job by the arrangement of nine carefully raised small bosses as a *square* on each of the 14 floats supporting the encircling rope of the fishing net.

THE THIRD CONCERN

The sculptor is showing that he has now reached the end of his sermon in stone. For technical reasons it is certain that the carving of this framing rope was done after the sculptured scene within it was completed and it is apparent that the carver’s intention was to summarise the meaning of all that had gone before by encircling it within the rope with its symbolic floats.

The Book of Job continues, ‘Wilt thou fill the nets with his skin and the cabin of fishes with his head? Remember the battle and speak no more’. The sculptor has indeed made us remember the battle, but with the completion of the framing rope his task is done; therefore he will ‘speak no more’, for he has come to the end of his sermon in stone.

CONCLUSION

The carvings on the Pitsford tympanum are very rare and precious, because at the end of the 12th century the Ransom Theory was abandoned in favour of Anselm’s exposition of the Doctrine of the Atonement. Consequently, carvings depicting the Ransom theory, such as these, vanished for ever from the repertoire of ecclesiastical sculpture. It is to be hoped that the unique historical importance of the whole surviving corpus of 12th-century English sculpture will become more widely recognised and that this heritage will be properly preserved for posterity.

If anyone is interested in reading the whole of this fascinating book, please contact Gillian Greenwood by email at: gillyflower123@googlemail.com, as at the time of writing she still has a few copies available.

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