

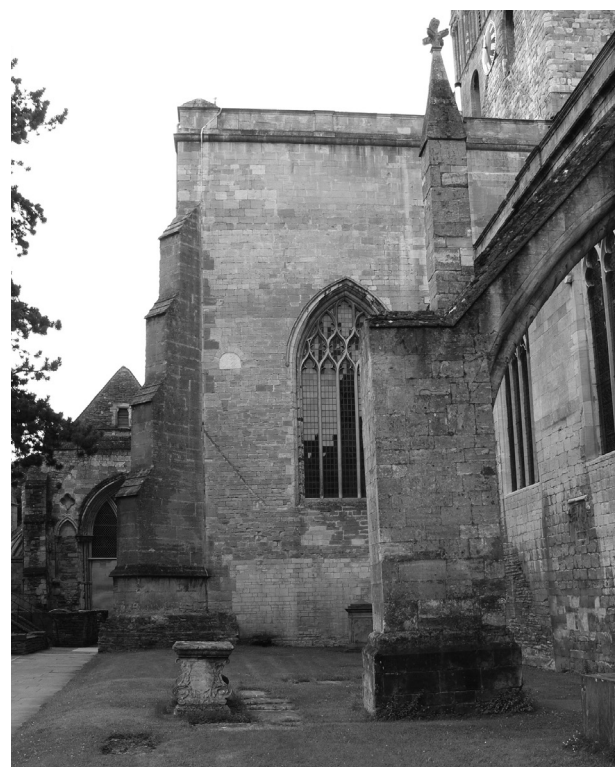
The Carved Panel in the External West Wall of the North Transept of Tewkesbury Abbey

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In 2010, during conservation work at Tewkesbury Abbey, the author was able to record in detail a small carved panel set high in the west wall of the north transept. This article presents the results of this analysis and concludes that the panel is a Romano-British carving reset in the wall in the late 11th century.

In the external face of the north transept west wall at Tewkesbury Abbey, about 10m above the ground, a semi-circular-headed panel is built into the wall (Figs 1–2). The panel is 722mm wide at the base and 570mm high, and it bears the remains of carving. The panel is in two halves and is carved from fine-grained, yellowish, oolitic limestone with many fossil shell fragment inclusions. During general restoration work on the north transept, the panel was cleaned, repaired and given a lime sheltercoat to offer protection from the effects of weathering that have already seriously affected the carved surface.

I was first contacted in February 2010 by Dr Richard K Morris who sent two photographs of the panel taken from the ground. Richard Morris also noted that there was no sign that the panel had been set into the Norman ashlar work of the transept at a later date, an observation subsequently supported by the detailed work of Graham O'Hare as part of the conservation programme. O'Hare established that the mortar in the transept wall was the same as that used for laying the ashlar and voussoirs of the carefully constructed setting for the panel and around the panel itself. It is, therefore, possible to say with a high degree of certainty that the panel was set into the wall when the transept was built in the late 11th century.



*Fig 1
The west face of the north transept of Tewkesbury Abbey, showing the panel just to the right of the corner buttress as a paler, semi-circular shape (photo: author)*



Fig 2
The Tewkesbury panel; the maximum width of the panel is 722 mm (photo: author)



Fig 3
The Tewkesbury panel with some details enhanced for clarity (photo: author)

In September 2010 Neil Birdsall, the architect in charge of the north transept restoration, offered the opportunity for a closer inspection from the scaffolding. During that and a subsequent visit in October I made a written and drawn record of the surviving carved details, and completed a photographic record of the panel under direct and oblique lighting. Photographs of the panel at each stage of the conservation process were also taken by Graham O'Hare.

The surface of the panel has been damaged not only by the effects of weathering but also by oblique blows from the blade of a mason's axe, presumably delivered from a ladder. This damage appears to have been deliberate and the most likely date for such targeted acts of destruction would seem to be the 16th or 17th century (see below).

Although very degraded, some of the details of the original carved image can still be disentangled (Fig 3). On the left of the panel there is a half-kneeling figure leaning forward with one arm held out low down in front. This figure is almost certainly male and he may be holding a staff (or perhaps a bow). The face has been badly weathered, but it is still possible to see that he has a large, rounded nose and a small mouth. His chin is clean shaven, but the rest of his face seems to be covered with a luxurious, swept-back growth of hair. The figure wears a rather large hat or crown with a crest of sharp points. The end of what may be the figure's cloak falls in folds onto the ground between his feet. Above his head there is what could be a tree or a billowing banner, or perhaps a smaller flying figure. The object of the first figure's attention appears on the right half of the panel. This is quite clearly a woman and she is not wearing much in the way of clothing. Her downward pointing breasts are carefully delineated and her legs are apart. She seems to be seated upon flowing folds of fabric, and the shape just below her left knee may be part of this drapery or a large rounded pitcher (see below). Her hair or headdress flies out on either side of her rather round head. Hardly any of the facial features survive, but there is some indication of a long, straight nose and one eyebrow. Her right arm is raised and from her right hand fall folds of cloth. Her left arm is twisted out towards the right border of the panel and she is holding a circular object in her left hand from which items seem to tumble to the ground. Alternatively the details in the lower right corner might belong to one or two diminutive figures, one kneeling and one standing, as suggested by Guy Métraux (pers comm).

Before the carving was recorded in detail it was thought that it might be Anglo-Saxon. It is not. The style is at odds with any Anglo-Saxon carving from Western Mercia and beyond. The panel is also unlike the many Romanesque carvings from the area. It is, however, similar in style to carvings from the Roman period and I believe that this is a piece of re-used Romano-British carving. The stance of the figure on the left is, for example, very like one of the cupids on the Facade of the Four Seasons from Bath (Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 8, cat 9–11, pl 4). The female figure bears many similarities to Venus on a relief from High Rochester north of Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland (Philips 1977, 74–6, cat 218, pl 56; Fig 4). If the Tewkesbury panel is a Romano-British carving, then its original location is unknown, but the scale suggests that it could have been set either in a public building, possibly a temple, or in a grander private house such as a villa. A 3rd-century Romano-British panel from Chepstow has also been re-set in a late 11th-century building – in the inner face of the south wall, at first floor level, of the Great Tower of the Norman castle that was constructed in 1067–71. This panel is 255mm wide and 255mm high and depicts a large figure and two smaller figures. Brewer suggests that the panel may have come from the Roman town of Caerwent, 8km to the west of Chepstow, '*for [this town] was probably the nearest source for the quantities of Roman masonry and tile used in the construction of the tower*' (Brewer 1986, 35–6, cat 51, pl 19). Other Romano-British sculptures re-set in churches in western Britain can be found at Marlborough and Tockenham in Wiltshire (Cunliffe and Fulford 1982, 27–28, cat 102, 104, pl 27). A Romano-British panel that is similar in shape to

Fig 4
Relief panel depicting Venus and two Nymphs from High Rochester (Bremenium), Northumberland (Reproduced by kind permission of The Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne)

the Tewkesbury panel, depicting a rider-god and other figures, was discovered in 1942 set into the wall of Calcot Barn at Newington Bagpath in Gloucestershire. This panel is 385mm wide and 265mm high and probably came originally from the small Roman town at Kingscote (Henig, 1993, 42, cat 125, pl 32).

The identification of the Tewkesbury panel as a piece of re-used Romano-British carving seems to be further supported by the subject matter. Parallels with a Venus carving from High Rochester have been noted above. This relief shows Venus bathing naked attended by two nymphs and Philips noted that this carving of Venus is 'based on a famous 3rd-cent. B.C. statue of the crouching Aphrodite by Doedalses, a favourite subject for copyists in late Hellenistic and Roman times' (Philips 1977, 75). There is a round pitcher behind the right knee of Venus in the High Rochester relief, and it is possible that the rounded object by the knee of the Tewkesbury figure might also be a pitcher. The male figure on the Tewkesbury panel could be Vulcan, the ugly, lame and rejected son of Jupiter and Juno who became a supremely talented smith and artist in metal. As a reward for forging thunderbolts, or perhaps in order to rescue Juno from a trap devised by Vulcan, Jupiter is said to have given Venus to Vulcan as a wife.

Martin Henig (pers comm) has offered an alternative interpretation, suggesting that the carving could be Diana (Artemis) surprised while bathing by the hunter Acteon. Concerned that the young man will boast that he has seen her naked, Diana metamorphoses Acteon into a stag and he is then attacked and torn to pieces by his own hounds. There are few depictions of this myth from Roman Britain, but one panel in a 2nd-century mosaic from Cirencester shows Acteon with stag's horns being set upon by hounds. It is possible that the now missing opposite panel might have contained a depiction of Diana (Cosh and Neal 2010, 12 & 110–13, ills 94 & 96). A sculptural relief from a funerary monument from Chester also depicts a horned Acteon being attacked by his hounds (Grosvenor Museum; Henig 2004, 30, cat 92, pl 27). The rather strange facial features of the Tewkesbury figure and the spikes above his head might be a depiction of Acteon actually changing into a stag. Henig (pers comm) offers a 5th-century BC parallel for this, an Italic terracotta plaque where Acteon has a stag's head (published in Guimond 1981, 461, cat 76).

If, however, the panel does depict Acteon and Diana it is, perhaps, odd that there seem to be no hounds in the image. These animals do not attack Acteon until after he flees from Diana, but they are a crucial part

of the story and they do appear together with Diana and Acteon on the Italic plaque mentioned above. Furthermore, the stance of the male figure seems to be more that of a supplicant rather than an intruder. Other classical myths might fit more closely with this interpretation of the scene, for example Cupid and Psyche or Apollo and Daphne. The sweeping lines across the face of the left figure at Tewkesbury might then be seen as Cupid's disguise (adopted so that Psyche would not recognise him). Equally the pointed crest on the figure's 'hat' could be Apollo's crown of the sun's rays and the shape in the upper part of the panel might be the flying figure of Cupid causing mischief with his bow and arrow.

The suggestion that the Tewkesbury panel might be a classical carving would, in itself, be quite exciting but the re-use of the panel is potentially much more intriguing. Stocker and Everson have proposed three types of re-use for carved or worked stone in later buildings – casual, functional and iconic (Stocker and Everson 1990, 83–101). The carefully constructed late-11th-century setting for the Tewkesbury panel shows that its re-use was not casual, nor does it appear functional. So could it be iconic? It is quite small and, unlike the Chepstow panel that was set internally at first floor level (see above), the Tewkesbury panel is external and so high up that it is now quite difficult to see. However, the panel would almost certainly have been painted before it was placed in its present location, and it would then have been much more noticeable to those entering the Abbey through the north entrance. But why preserve a pagan image in this way? Malcolm Thurlby (pers comm) wondered if such a sexually explicit carving might not be grouped with the fairly widespread sheela-na-gig figures that are found in many churches (for example, the female figure at Ampney St Peter in Gloucestershire). However, in Lincoln a Romano-British carved panel depicting a seated figure (probably the Mithraic deity Arimanius: Stocker 1998) was built into the later 11th-century fabric of the tower of St Peter-in-Gowt, where '*re-set in the public façade of the church, it is clearly intended to represent Christ in Majesty or perhaps St Peter*' (Stocker and Everson 1990, 94–5, ill 27; Stocker and Everson 2006, 45, 47, 51–2, 55, 208–10, fig 4.123). David Stocker has drawn my attention (pers comm) to another panel that seems to depict a Roman cult scene which was, presumably, imbued with a new Christian meaning when it was reset into the fabric of St Martin's Church in Lincoln. The panel was drawn by Maurice Johnson in the early 18th century and published in 1965 (Hill 1965, 143, fig

14). I suggest that the Tewkesbury carving could also be an example of early medieval re-interpretation of a 'found' image. In this case, the panel may have been thought to represent a scene from a saint's life (Stocker pers comm). Alternatively, with the careful addition of a painted dress for the woman and suitably angelic robes and wings on the standing figure – and perhaps a certain amount of plaster re-modelling or a preliminary coat of a gesso-like ground – the original subject matter might have been transformed into an Annunciation scene. Extensive use of such preparatory ground material in the Anglo-Saxon period has been noted by James Lang on carvings from Northumbria, and Emily Howe has identified similar use of such material on the Lichfield Angel (Lang 1990, 135–46; Howe 2008, 85–91). While such an interpretation must remain speculative, it would be appropriate for an image of the Annunciation to be visible to those approaching the entrance of the Abbey church, itself dedicated to St Mary the Virgin.

We do not know where the panel was located before it was re-set in its present position in the later 11th century. It may of course have been 'newly' found. However, although it was observed above that the style of the carving is not Anglo-Saxon, the suggested re-interpretation and painted adaptation of an Antique carving certainly could have taken place during the later Anglo-Saxon period when there is evidence to support the presence of an important church in Tewkesbury (Heighway 2003, 4–7; Bassett 1998, 10–20). If so, is it possible that the panel was treated as an important image within this late Anglo-Saxon church, and that its careful preservation, albeit in a rather idiosyncratic location, was as a result of the value that had accrued to the image? Might this be why this little panel was not destroyed but was apparently treated with a degree of respect by the first Norman abbot of Tewkesbury and the abbey's master builder? Such an image in a fairly prominent location would also have attracted the special attention of the iconoclasts of the 16th or 17th centuries, offering an explanation for the deliberate damage mentioned above.

Richard Bryant has recently completed the Western Midlands volume for the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture published by OUP for the British Academy. Among several other current projects, he is actively involved in research and excavations at Deerhurst Church, Gloucestershire. He also continues to produce the specialist illustrations for which he is well known – most recently a drawing of the 9th-century Anglo-Saxon ring from Berkeley.

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