

THE ROTHLEY SHAFT: AN ART-HISTORICAL REASSESSMENT

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The sculpted shaft at Rothley has long been regarded as key evidence for the importance of this place in the early medieval period. Because of this, it has been discussed primarily in relation to its site, rather than as a cultural object in its own right. This article offers an entirely new, art-historical analysis of the imagery on the Rothley shaft, through comparison with early medieval metalwork. Not only does this strengthen the argument for a mid-ninth century, pre-Viking date for the shaft, but it also deeply enriches our understanding of the audience that the monument served. The findings have important implications for Rothley as a site and, therefore, illustrate how visual culture can be used to contextualise places.

MONUMENTS AND MEDIA

In the concluding pages of their collaborative work, *Fragments of History: Reconsidering the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments*, Orton, Wood and Lees summarised their call for a new approach to pre-Viking stone sculpture that would pay closer attention to the social forces involved in the making of stone sculpture.¹ Orton and Wood's individual contributions attempt to reconstruct the localised, cultural geography surrounding the two monuments, with the implicit suggestion that the landscape was a deposit of social memory that gave the sculptures meaning.² Orton proposes that monuments should be thought of as buildings, and that their relationship to dwelling determined their function. He sees the Bewcastle monument as 'a building, which vividly illustrates how, though not all erected buildings are constructed for human habitation, all buildings are determined by the need to dwell'.³

As with any other architectural element, a monument conducts or marks the space around it, but the proposal that Anglo-Saxon monuments should be thought of as a type of dwelling is only pragmatic if specifics about its site can be reconstructed. In the absence of necessary information about the site, an alternative mode of access to the audiences served or excluded by a monument can be found in the surrounding material culture that conditioned the imagery carved upon it. Art-historical scholarship has tended to emphasise the social dimension of Anglo-Saxon sculpture simply due to its monumental status. Considering the fact that portable media appears to have played such a distinctive role in the formation of

¹ Orton, F., Wood, I. and Lees, C., *Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments*, Manchester, 2007.

² *Ibid.*, see chapters 'Place', pp. 13–31; and 'Fragments of Northumbria', pp. 105–30. See also Wood, I., 'Ruthwell: Contextual Searches', in C. E. Karkov and F. Orton, *Theorising Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, Morgantown, 2003, pp. 104–30.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.



Fig. 1. The Rothley monument, North face, St Mary and St John's Church, Rothley.
Author's own photograph.

early medieval visual languages, it is all the more important to resist projecting our own understanding of artistic hierarchies onto the products of the past.⁴

An example of a monument which has resisted neat scholarly categorisation is the sculpted shaft which currently stands in the churchyard of St Mary and St John's in Rothley (Fig. 1). *The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture* has yet to publish a volume on Leicestershire, and as Rothley is unique in its immediate vicinity and somewhat of an outlier in the broader context of Anglian monuments, it does not sit easily within surveys.⁵ Proposed dates for Rothley have varied dramatically from the

⁴ Hawkes, J., 'Reading Stone', in C. E. Karkow and F. Orton, *Theorising Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, Morgantown, 2003, p. 27; Bailey, R. N., *England's Earliest Sculptors*, Toronto, 1996, pp. 6–8 and pp. 119–24.

⁵ Prof. Joanna Story, who is currently working alongside Prof. Rosemary Cramp to complete this volume, has confirmed that the general consensus prior to their research is that Rothley is earlier and probably pre-Viking, although unusual in its vicinity (personal communication, December, 2014).

first half of the ninth century to the eleventh century.⁶ A renewed assessment of the iconography of the Rothley monument strengthens the argument for a pre-Viking, mid-ninth century date. Its status as an outlier also provides an interesting contrast to other late eighth- to ninth-century trends in sculpture, and arguably reflects the dramatic shift in elite metalwork fashions during this period.

The sculpture is more appropriately described as a shaft rather than a cross, seeing as a cross-head has never been located. The square top is lipped around the edge, with the inner section recessed, as if something was sat upon the shaft, rather than attached using a dowel.⁷ This evidence means that the Rothley monument cannot conclusively be deemed to have originally been a cross. However, its form clearly does derive from the earlier cross-shafts, both in terms of its slender, tall proportions, and the division of its ornament into panels. It is therefore not a misrepresentation of the evidence to discuss Rothley within this tradition. It is fragmented into two parts, with a shorter, upper section attached to the lower half using mortar; it is unclear when this upper half was attached. It was present when Routh wrote his article in 1937, but it is not featured in either the drawing or the measurements of the cross in Nichols's survey of the antiquities of Leicestershire, compiled between 1795 and 1815.⁸ Judging from the ornament, the size and the stone of the upper fragment, it seems very likely that it was part of the original shaft. It is far less worn than the lower half, which suggests that it may have been found in the church or churchyard during the nineteenth or early twentieth century, and subsequently re-attached.

No physical remains of an early Anglo-Saxon church at Rothley survive and although David Parsons has conducted a thorough survey of potential foundations in Leicestershire, the shaft is the main piece of evidence for his assertion that Rothley was the site of an early minster.⁹ It is also uncertain where the cross originally stood; the heavy weathering on the South face indicates that it might have been partially buried, and later re-erected.¹⁰ Close by to the Church at Rothley, an excavation was undertaken in 2006 at The Grange, Fowke Street, which revealed a series of Anglo-Saxon graves dating continuously from 680 to 980.¹¹ This continual use across these dates suggests that it was a well-established site for Christian funerary practice.

⁶ Routh, T. E., 'The Rothley Cross-Shaft and the Sproxton Cross', *LAHS*, 20, 1937, p. 70. Routh concludes by arguing for a tenth-century date, but throughout the discussion cites eighth- to eleventh-century evidence; Kendrick, T. D., *Anglo-Saxon Art to AD 900*, London, 1938, pp. 133, 207–8, 210. Kendrick settles for a date within the first half of the ninth century; Pevsner, N., *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland*, London, 1977, p. 219. Pevsner cites Kendrick in assigning the sculpture to the mid-ninth century.

⁷ Brian Verity (Archaeological Warden for Rothley), personal communication, January 2015.

⁸ Nichols, J., *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester: Vol 3, Part 2*, 1804, pp. 941–65; Pl. CXXIX, p. 958. Available online at <http://leicester.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15407coll6/id/2904/rec/2>. Please note that in the online version the relevant pages according to the hyperlinks are pp. 511–45, with the image at p. 535. [Accessed 30/12/2014.]

⁹ Parsons, D., 'Before the Parish: The Church in Anglo-Saxon Leicestershire', in J. Bourne (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Landscapes in the East Midlands*, Leicester, 1991, pp. 14, 32.

¹⁰ Brian Verity, personal communication, January 2015.

¹¹ Upson-Smith, T., 'Archaeological excavation at The Grange, Rothley, Leicestershire: March–June 2007', *Northamptonshire Archaeology*, Report 11/121, June 2011. Available online at http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch7031/dissemination/pdf/nortamp3-155155_1.pdf. [Accessed 12/03/2015.]

Near the Ridgeway the site of an impressive Roman Villa has also been excavated, indicating that the Anglo-Saxon settlement was established near to a previously important Romano-British site. Moreover, the extensive ecclesiastical connections of the church, along with the evidence of Domesday, suggests that Rothley was almost certainly an Anglo-Saxon *villa regalis*.¹² Notwithstanding these indicators, the gathering together of such scattered contextual evidence for Rothley as a site offers little to illuminate the shaft itself. A reassessment of its imagery can provide us with a much greater insight into the potential meaning it held for the audience it served.

ABBREVIATED IMAGES

The lowest panel of the North face of the Rothley shaft has an unusual gable-shaped top, containing a slender sub-section of interlace combined with vine-scroll, which is then framed by an outer-section of plain interlace (Figs 1 and 6). Before the gabled top, the outer panel of interlace is capped by a horizontal bar. Above this is a smaller, arched niche, which resembles a window beneath a gabled roof-top. In Nichols's drawing this is presented as merely forming an alternative type of framing device,¹³ similar to the lozenge-shaped dividers found on the Sandbach cross, which ultimately derive from metalwork.¹⁴ In T. E. Routh's article, he declared the gable-design to be 'meaningless'.¹⁵ However, it is clear from the thickness of the gable-shape in relation to the other frames, and the presence of the otherwise incongruous arch below, that this is actually intended to look like an architectural feature. The top of the gable roof sprouts into a lozenge, filled with a central cluster of foliate stems in a loose marigold formation, and eventually blooms into a cross-shaped arrangement at the top of the panel. The composition appears like a gabled building, filled with vine-scroll, and growing into a 'living cross' from the peak of the roof.

The fact that this gabled frame might be an architectural representation is suggested through comparison with the building façades depicted at the bases of the Heysham and Hoddom cross-shaft fragments. The Heysham fragment depicts a bandaged, corpse-like figure within the doorway of a gabled structure, which is symmetrically adorned with rounded windows, through which three additional heads peer out (Fig. 2).¹⁶ The steep gable at the top of the edifice tapers and curls inwards at either end, and two shafts positioned on the slopes of the roof seem to have been topped with cross-heads. The scheme draws upon the antique tradition of Lazarus imagery, but represented as a potentially pluralistic or generalised image of a tomb, and a resurrected corpse. Comparatively, the Hoddom fragment utilises a gabled structure as a framing device under which a haloed figure carries a book, probably representing Christ rather than an Evangelist, as he is the only full-length figure depicted on the fragment. The gabled structure again emphasises that this is

¹² Jill Bourne, personal communication, March 2016.

¹³ Nichols, J., *History and Antiquities*, Vol. III, Image Pl. CXXIX, p. 958.

¹⁴ Hawkes, J., *The Sandbach Crosses: Sign and Significance in Anglo-Saxon Sculpture*, Dublin and Portland, 2002, pp. 134, 136.

¹⁵ Routh, T. E., 'The Rothley Cross-Shaft', p. 72.

¹⁶ Tweddle, D., Biddle, M. and Kjølbye-Biddle, B., *CASSS Vol. IX: South-East England*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 196–9; Illustration 509.



Fig. 2. Shaft base from St Peter's Church, Heysham.
Image © Joan Bryden, www.photonorth.uk.

hierarchically the most important face of the cross-shaft, by recreating the frontality of a façade, crowned with an openwork finial containing a cross at the apex of the roof. Both fragments feature distinctive round-headed windows as another means of articulating the impression of an iconic edifice, so that the high archway, the gable, finials and windows can be seen as the key constituent parts used to denote a monumental structure, which are also visible at Rothley.

The depiction of the gable head as a short-hand for an architectural structure might reflect the influence of smaller, portable objects in the formation of early medieval imagery. Egon Wamers has demonstrated persuasively that the condensed imagery found on smaller objects, such as reliquaries, liturgical vessels and buckles during the conversion period, were just as meaningful iconographically as their more monumental counterparts; he refers to these abbreviated images as 'iconograms'.¹⁷

¹⁷ Wamers, E., 'Behind Animals, Plants and Interlace: Salin's Style II on Christian Objects', in J. Graham-Campbell and M. Ryan (eds), *Anglo-Saxon/Irish Relations Before the Vikings*, 2009, p. 156.



Fig. 3. Godescalc Evangelistary, Paris, BNF, lat.1203, folio 3v.

Similarly, Anna Gannon presents multiple instances in which minute and often lower-quality images, found on later eighth-century silver sceatta coins, can be seen as of comparable theological significance to the imagery carved on cross-shafts.¹⁸ The simplified motif of the gable as a basic tool for architectural representation can also be interpreted in relation to abbreviated imagery.

Lori Ann Garner's analysis of the literary tropes of imagining architectural spaces in Old English poetry has drawn attention to the repeated focus on gables as a descriptive short-hand for emphasising structures of particular importance.¹⁹

¹⁸ Gannon, A., 'A Chip off the Rod', in K. L. Jolly, C. E. Karkov and S. L. Keefer (eds), *Cross and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England*, Morgantown, 2008, pp. 153–71; Gannon, A., 'Lies, Damned Lies and Iconography', in J. Hawkes (ed.), *Making Histories: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Insular Art*, York 2011, Donington, 2013, pp. 291–302.

¹⁹ Garner, L. A., *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England*, Notre Dame, 2011, pp. 47, 100, 101.

In *Beowulf*, the hall of Hereot is described as ‘*heah ond horngeap*’, or ‘*hornreced*’, so that the nobility of the hall is conveyed through the height of its gables.²⁰ In Andreas, the account of Christ speaking in a temple describes the site as ‘where a temple of the lord was built, high and wide-gabled, known among heroes, wondrously adorned’.²¹ Garner refers to the Heysham cross fragment as a visual counterpart to the poetic tropes of gables and height as a means of establishing the architectural settings of heroic narratives. Her argument applies well to the imagery at Rothley, where these literary tropes of heroic architecture have been condensed to the most basic elements of structural representation. If, as Leslie Webster has suggested, Anglo-Saxon stylistic traits related closely to oral, ekphrastic traditions, then this short-hand representation of architecture on the Rothley shaft exemplifies a bridge between verbal and visual abbreviations.²²

The closest type of iconography that features a building as the focus of the image are those related to the Fountain of Life (Psalm 36), a traditional Christian concept relating to the fountain of Paradise (Genesis 2:6 and 10) which nurtures the Tree of Life (Revelation 22:1–2).²³ The image of the fountain was often depicted in relation to an octagonal building, alluding to Christ’s tomb, as in the Carolingian Godescalc Evangelistary of the late eighth century (Fig. 3), and the Soissons Gospels of the early ninth century. Unlike on the Rothley monument, the manuscripts show the traditional eight columns supporting the pitched roof of a centrally planned building, capped by a golden cross, which was the standard ‘type’ for depicting Christ’s tomb. Animals gather to feed on the luscious vegetation surrounding the fountain. The main similarity between Rothley and the Carolingian depictions is the way in which the apex of the roof is emphasised as the source of life, and crowned with a cross, which at Rothley is formed from a living vine.

Martin Biddle has convincingly argued that the temple-like building depicted on the *XPICTIANO RELIGIO* denier of Louis the Pious, from the second quarter of the ninth century, was intended to represent the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem (Fig. 4); it similarly shows a gabled structure, crowned with a large cross.²⁴ This conflation of tomb iconography and the nurturing concept of the Fountain of Life could also be seen to underpin the image at Rothley. Furthermore, if the sculptor working at Rothley did have a limited repertoire, then the decision to fill the inner archway with vine-scroll could have been an easier means of conveying the core Christian message of the Resurrection and new life, without needing to depict Christ himself. This multivalent image would therefore encompass the key liturgical practices of the Christian faith, including baptism, the Eucharist and funerary rituals, whilst also evoking the structural idioms associated with church architecture.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²² Webster, L., ‘Encrypted Visions: Style and Sense in the Anglo-Saxon Minor Arts, AD 400–900’, in C. E. Karkov and G. Hardin Brown (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Styles*, New York, 2003, pp. 11–30.

²³ Underwood, P. A., ‘The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 5, 1950, pp. 41, 43–138.

²⁴ Biddle, M., ‘XPICTIANO RELIGIO and the Tomb of Christ’, in R. Naismith, M. Allen and E. Screen (eds), *Early Medieval Monetary History*, Farnham, 2014, pp. 115–44.



Fig. 4. Denier of Louis the Pious, Kent, EMC database 2010_0132, reverse.

If the Rothley gabled-structure was intended to recall a 'Fountain of Life' visual type, its formulation is close to another mid-ninth-century Anglo-Saxon artefact, thought to fall within this iconographical tradition: the 'Æthelwulf' ring in the British Museum (Fig. 5).²⁵ The ring probably pre-dates 868, the year that Æthelwulf of Wessex died, seeing as his name is inscribed around the hoop of the ring and was potentially given as an elite gift to demonstrate the royal allegiance of the wearer. The imagery on the ring intersects the elite worlds of the court and religion by coupling a potentially Christianised message with the secular, political nature of its inscription. The entire design is picked out in low relief using a niello background to contrast with the raised, golden lines of the image. Above the band of text the iconography sits snugly within the mitred or indeed gabled shape of the ring, dominated by two flanking peacocks who face the central division of the fountain. This division begins at the bottom of the ornamental frame with a triangular base, upon which a roundel containing a four-petalled rosette sits. A second encircled rosette is repeated at the top of the panel on a slender stem that links these two roundels together. The two enclosed rosettes can be read as a cross-formation as well as vegetation, and are therefore comparable to the attempt at Rothley to combine the imagery of growth with Eucharistic overtones.

At Rothley the disc and rosette motif is not used, although the doubling-up of two florid, encased patterns along a stylised 'stem' is comparable to the Æthelwulf ring in the manner of representing growth within panelled sections. Using varied compartmentalisation to control an ornament is particularly characteristic of late eighth- to ninth-century Mercian metalwork, and the lozenge was increasingly

²⁵ Webster, L., *Anglo-Saxon Arts: a New History*, London, 2012, p. 151; Webster, L. and Backhouse, J. (eds), *The Making of England*, pp. 268–9; Nelson, J. L., 'Presidential Address: England and the Continent in the Ninth Century: III. Rights and Rituals', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, Vol. 14, 2004, p. 21.



Fig. 5. Gold and niello ring, British Museum. Image © The Trustees of the British Museum.

employed as a standardised ‘type’ across a wide-range of objects, potentially as an alternative to the cross.²⁶ A copper-alloy strap-end from Long Wittenham in Oxfordshire demonstrates the use of a lozenge to segment the axial stem of the cramped space that the metalworker was manipulating, and illustrates how in many cases the simplistic iconography and style of the Rothley cross was indebted to the visual language of the metalworker.²⁷ The obverse of one of King Offa’s sceatta coins from the late eighth century, produced by the moneyer Oethelred, features a lozenge containing a star or marigold pattern, whilst each of the corners sprout into three stems to create a cross-formation, like a condensed version of the blooming lozenge at Rothley.²⁸

By situating the Rothley shaft between a more mass-produced stylistic mode exemplified by the Long Wittenham strap-end and Offa’s coinage, and the high elite gift-exchange represented by the Æthelwulf ring, it is notable that the imagery of Rothley was deeply indebted to abbreviated motifs popularised through smaller and exchangeable objects, which were tapping into the prestigious imagery patronised by the church and secular elite. The multivalent meanings conveyed by the iconography

²⁶ Gannon, A., ‘Lies, Damned Lies and Iconography’, p. 297. The author also explores the potential roots of the motif in relation to the Resurrection and depictions of the tomb of Christ (pp. 294 and 298). Whilst it is difficult to know whether such a simple shape continued to convey these deeper meanings, it is an interesting case-study in which small objects such as coins helped to proliferate and popularise such motifs.

²⁷ Graham-Campbell, J., ‘Some new and neglected finds of 9th-century Anglo-Saxon ornamental metalwork’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 26, 1983, fig. 3.4.

²⁸ Gannon, A., ‘Lies, Damned Lies and Iconography’, fig. 24.4, p. 297.



Fig. 6. The Rothley monument, North face, detail. Author's own photograph.

of Rothley were reliant on an audience who were well-versed in these visual short-hands through a material culture that encouraged the proliferation of simple, idiomatic motifs.

VINE-SCROLL IN THE NINTH CENTURY

The interlace, vine-scroll and heraldic beast panels which ornament the remaining surface of the Rothley shaft can also be understood through the language of metalwork. The Pentney Hoard brooches provide one of our best insights into the appearance of high-quality, elite metalwork during the ninth century, and also provide some clear examples where the motif of the vine-scroll had extended beyond its initial Romanising or 'classicismising' origins. The brooch in the Pentney Hoard that is thought to be the earliest is formed entirely from heavily stylised vine-scroll, set against a gilded



Fig. 7. The Rothley Monument, South face, detail. Author's own photograph.

back-plate to provide a colour-contrast.²⁹ The scroll-work is characterised by curvature, loose overlaps and slender leaves, which terminate each of the stems and elegantly curl into bud-like nodes at their tips. The emphasis on symmetry about a central axis within each of these four panels of scroll-work is comparable to the wide panels of foliate work, with a strong diagonal and vertical emphasis found on the North- and South-face upper fragments, but perhaps more substantially on the heavily worn second panel of the South face. The hint of looped-ends and nodule terminals can just be seen at the bottom corners of this panel, and the way the worn surface implies clusters of pretzel-like loops suggests an original formation that may have been closely comparable to the Pentney Hoard brooch, albeit with tighter overlapping forms. The distinctive nodule-ended, narrow, sweeping leaves and budded terminals are closely comparable to those most clearly visible in the better-preserved upper fragment of the Rothley monument (Fig. 7). This kind of vegetal interlace could also be compared to other Trehwiddle-style finds, such as a silver strap-end from Lode and the slightly less prestigious copper-alloy strap-end from Long Wittenham.³⁰

The closest parallels to the vine-scroll located on the Rothley monument are from metalwork forms deriving from Southumbrian elite accessories of the early ninth century. This aesthetic was therefore looking more towards localised, Mercian imagery, rather than explicitly evoking *romanitas* or the prestige of

²⁹ Webster, L. and Backhouse, J. (eds), *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600–900*, London, 1991, cat. no. 187f, p. 230.

³⁰ Graham-Campbell, J., 'Some new and neglected finds', pp. 145–6; figs 3.3 and 3.4.

foreign trading links. Metalwork exemplars such as these re-inscribed Christian iconographical concepts within a widely appropriated stylistic mode, in which secular and sacred imagery were intimately linked. Examples such as the Rothley monument demand, therefore, to be distanced from more generalised arguments that there was an increased emulation of *romanitas* in ninth-century sculpture. This is particularly interesting in the light of other ninth-century monuments that make explicit references to the Roman world in their form, such as the Masham column, which clearly draws on Roman triumphal columns as a means for displaying relief carving.³¹ Another aspect of this is the prevalence of sarcophagus-like shrines within the surviving stone fragments of Mercia, such as the Hedda stone, the Wirksworth slab, the Hovingham panel and the Lichfield angel. Arguably, *romanitas* was being far more explicitly expressed through different forms of stone monument, which suggests that traditional cross-shafts with basic vine-scroll no longer needed to convey such a strong connection to the power of the universal church. Rosemary Cramp has suggested that Rothley might reflect the intersection of lay and ecclesiastical patronage, which could explain the apparent lack of explicit interest in late antique forms that characterised other sculpturally productive ecclesiastical or monastic sites, in favour of a more accessible aesthetic with a wide currency.³²

METALWORK BEASTS

The mysterious ‘beast’ on the South face at Rothley can similarly be viewed within the trend for zoomorphic interlace and vine-scroll found within late eighth- to ninth-century metalwork (Fig. 8). When Routh dated Rothley to the tenth century, he discussed how deciding whether the beast on the South face is ‘Ringerike,’ or ‘Jellinge’, in style would provide the true key to dating the monument. However, both of these Scandinavian beast-types are usually entirely subsumed in interlace, and have consistently slender bodies in comparison to so-called ‘Anglian’ beasts. The tail on the Rothley beast transforms from its plump, proud chest into a consistent looping interlace that has far more in common with the Mercian animals found on the Peterborough Hedda stone and the Gandersheim casket than to Scandinavian-influenced beasts. The only feature that distances the Rothley beast from other ‘Anglian’ beasts is the combination of the snake-like body with no immediately visible foreleg. The potential ‘wing’ on its back is also unusually stumpy in comparison to other winged Mercian beasts, which usually end in a pointed, flicked terminus.³³

A possible local comparison for this beast-type can be found on a brooch discovered in Leicester, just south of Rothley, and dated to the early ninth century (Fig. 9).³⁴ It would not have been an exceptionally high status object, and instead is a chip-carved, copper-alloy imitation of older, late eighth-century trends. Nonetheless,

³¹ Hawkes, J., ‘The Art of the Church in Ninth-Century Anglo-Saxon England: the Case of the Masham Column’, *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 8, 2002, p. 344.

³² Cramp, R., ‘Presidential Address in the Study of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture’, *LAHS*, 84, 2010, p. 11.

³³ Webster, L., ‘The Anglo-Saxon hinterland: animal style in Southumbrian eighth-century England’, in *Tiere, Menschen, Götter: Wikingerzeitliche Kunststile und ihre neuzeitliche Rezeption*, Göttingen, 2001, pp. 39–62.

³⁴ L. Webster and J. Backhouse (eds), *The Making of England*, pp. 228–9.



Fig. 8. 'The Rothley Beast,' South face, detail. Author's own photograph.

on one of the four panels are two confronted beasts, with thick snake-like bodies that transform into interlace at the bottom. One of the contorted bodies features a zig-zag wing protruding from its back. The Rothley beast could convincingly have been derived from similar snake-like animals, which filled the panels of metal jewellery and strap-ends during this period.



Fig. 9. Author's sketch of copper-alloy disc brooch, Ashmolean Museum.



Fig. 10. Strap-end from Worksop, Bassetlaw Museum; photograph by Gabor Thomas.

Potentially the unusual appearance of the Rothley beast could simply imply a localised interpretation of the more commonly observed types of Anglian beasts. The closest surviving comparison to the dragon-like appearance of the Rothley beast exists on a ninth-century strap-end found at Worksop, Nottinghamshire (Fig. 10).³⁵ Both have a crescent-shaped lower jaw which meets a curved, spindly neck, before developing into a plump-chested, serpentine body. The tail of the Worksop beast has a hooked terminal, and does not descend into interlace like at Rothley. In Gabor Thomas's survey the Worksop strap-end is grouped alongside other examples, which imply that this stylistic type of beast should feature a foreleg and a back-leg; however, in this particular case the feet have expanded to fill the space, creating two nondescript, bulky adjoining limbs. This mannered treatment of the legs gives the impression of a winged, dragon-like beast; a similar stylistic misunderstanding or adjustment could have been made by the Rothley sculptor in relation to models comparable to the Worksop beast. Seeing as these types of beast were shared between elite and lower-status ware, by the mid-ninth century they could hardly have implied an exceptionally exclusive visual language, and if they did, their appearance and meaning bridged various social strata.

³⁵ Thomas, G., 'A Survey of Late Anglo-Saxon and Viking-Age Strap-Ends from Britain', Ph.D. thesis, *University College London*, 2000. Available online at <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1317562/1/248475.pdf>, fig. 3.2C, Cat. No. 289, p. 492. According to Thomas's grouping, the Worksop example belongs to Groups Ala, iii and iv. Group A strap-ends are dated AD 800–900 (see p. 454). Other strap-ends within the wide-ranging Group A type clearly indicate the later Scandinavian influence that Routh read into the Rothley beast (see p. 494 and cat. no. 390 on p. 496 in particular), whereas the Worksop example represents a mannered version of other, clearly 'Anglian', beasts.

CONCLUSION

From the late eighth into the ninth century it was not only the style and material of popular metalwork that was changing. Trading hubs and market settlements were also on the rise, and although the major *wics* remained near to important coastal harbours, the number of metalwork finds within this idiom are spread across the country, reflecting a shared appearance across a wide range of objects.³⁶ Any suggestions for socio-economic readings of the Rothley monument ornament must therefore consider the changing status of comparative visual culture during the ninth century, if we are to accept this dating. For earlier cross-shafts, such as Ruthwell and Bewcastle, there are often clear parallels to imported media linking the (Northumbrian) church to Late Antique forms, which must reflect a desire to represent cross-cultural ecclesiastical links. Whilst there are many sculptural examples from the ninth century that were clearly evoking *Romanitas* through their form, traditional cross-shafts exhibiting the kind of ornament observable at Rothley do not reflect such a strong desire to assert macro-geographical connections. If Rothley was an elite monument, it was conveyed by drawing on a widely recognisable, insular style that was propagated alongside the growth in trading hubs, and which bridged various social levels. It reflects a visual language which derived its currency through native production and trade, rather than relying on the cultural prestige of exotic materials or distant trading links with foreign ecclesiastical centres.

As the Rothley shaft does not feature any iconography that would have explicitly required a literate audience to understand, it is reasonable to suggest that this was a less exclusive monument than those from monastic contexts, and that may have served a lay audience. Rosemary Cramp has proposed tentatively that after the early ninth century there could have been an increased number of small pockets of lay patronage.³⁷ If Parson's analysis is correct and Rothley was the site of an early minster, then some kind of association with the Fountain of Life and liturgical practice would have been entirely appropriate. The recently excavated set of graves near the churchyard shows that there was continued funerary practice at the site during the proposed dating period for the cross-shaft, and considering that the documentary evidence reveals Rothley to be the central place of a large, lay and ecclesiastic estate, the cross-shaft could have formed part of the material fabric of a wealthy minster. As minsters were often associated with large rural estates rather than major urban centres, Rothley might well have been such a settlement.³⁸

The 'Fountain of Life' imagery on the Rothley cross conveys a multifaceted iconography through a visual language that was primarily mediated through portable objects. The abbreviated gabled structure, with its blossoming vine-scroll, invites a diverse set of intertwined Christological interpretations, and therefore establishes an iconography that is succinct and accessible, whilst also being appropriate to a variety of liturgical rituals. The desire to mark Rothley out as an important religious

³⁶ L. Webster and J. Backhouse (eds), *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600–900*, London, 1991, pp. 220–1.

³⁷ Cramp, R., 'Presidential Address in the Study of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture', *LAHS*, 84, 2010, pp. 19–20.

³⁸ Hooke, D., 'Mercia: Landscape and Environment', in M. P. Brown and C. A. Farr (eds), *Mercia*, p. 170.

site, without it being necessary to draw on cross-cultural links or *Romanitas* to express this, perhaps indicates that the patrons of the Rothley shaft were indeed only concerned with emulating visual prestige at a regional or local level. Motifs like the beast, the blossoming lozenge, the vine-scroll and the idiomatic gabled edifice all had counterparts in the surrounding, wider material culture, and primarily rely on a visual language that was mediated through abbreviated imagery.

Whilst monuments do stake a claim in their surrounding landscape, the Rothley shaft acts as a reminder that the semiotics of early medieval material culture did not rely on the same hierarchies that condition our understanding of artistic media. The imagery of portable objects that would have constituted much of the visual language, internalised daily by a Mercian viewer, can therefore assist us greatly in the interpretation of the social forces conditioning the carving of such monuments, beyond reconstructing their local geographies.