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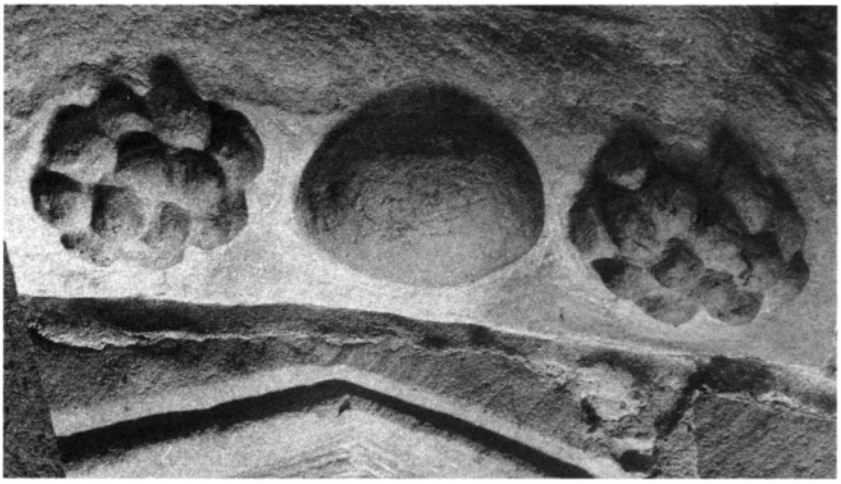
REAL PEOPLE IN ENGLISH ROMANESQUE SCULPTURE

Rita Wood

Most Romanesque art pictures a timeless spiritual condition by symbolism, and is often assumed to be unapproachable by the fast-moving scientific twentieth century, though the vigorous texture of jostling lions, dragons and foliage has a certain appeal. Just occasionally, however, twelfth-century sculpture shows people of the period in actual situations, and this may allow us to appreciate something of an apparently alien world.

If we are looking for examples of 'real people' in early medieval art, the well-known illustrations of the labours of the months are likely to come to mind, for they are frequent and immediately recognizable in manuscript illuminations as well as in sculpture. Comparisons of twelfth-century examples in the two media can be close, but would probably confirm the usual opinion that the stone carvers were copyists and poor ones at that. This essay, however, will look at a different set of illustrations, a number of naïve and apparently original depictions of the village priest and his people. It is hoped to show that the carvers had

Fig. 1. The figure at Fridaythorpe. Photograph by John McElheran.



2(a).

access to a wide variety of illustrated material and, untrained as they were, occasionally drew from memory and from life.

The priest with wafer

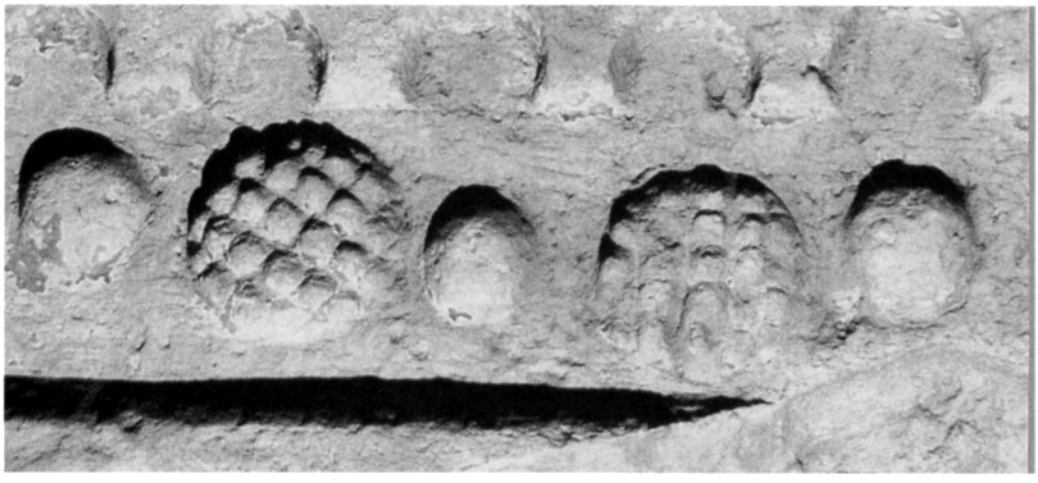
The church at Fridaythorpe (Yorkshire) has a figure carved on the voussoir in the centre of the chancel arch. (Fig. 1) The carving is folded round into the soffit, and shows a standing man holding up a disc on which is inscribed a cross. This man is not likely to represent the risen Christ because he has no halo or staff, but John Hutchinson thought he might be 'a priest holding up the Host' (the Eucharistic bread). The Eucharistic elements in the West at this time were a round flat wafer of unleavened bread and, for the priest, wine also; the people did not communicate often, and then usually in bread only. The elevation of the consecrated wafer and of the chalice were becoming the climax of the service for the lay participants, and it is perhaps an elevation which is pictured here. This moment epitomized the meeting of heaven and earth in the church: the priest with the wafer might be intended as a reminder of the spiritual presence in the sanctuary, or as an actual individual at this point in the rite.

Schoolmen and philosophers in the twelfth century were not satisfied with St Augustine's judgement that 'a mystery of faith can be profitably believed; it cannot be profitably examined.' They analysed and defined the sacrament ever more minutely. Ritual developed to match the increasing veneration for the consecrated elements which this attention aroused. Earlier illustrations of the priest during the Mass indicate this change of emphasis by showing various other moments but not the elevation. The ceremonial elevation of the consecrated elements for adoration by the people had its origin some time in the eleventh or twelfth century, and transubstantiation was declared essential to faith in 1215. There are no known dates for the church at Fridaythorpe.

Representations of the bread and wine are not usually naturalistic. Illustrations showing a round bread roll, not a flat wafer, may have been derived from the Eastern church, which used leavened bread for the sacrament. Wine was more often indicated by grapes and foliage than by a chalice. Bunches of grapes are conventionally shown by cross-hatched domes at Salton and Austerfield, and alternate with rolls of bread (Figs. 2a and b). The clump of simple foliage to the left of the figure at Fridaythorpe is probably intended as a vine because just near the wafer it has a small round termination which could represent a bunch of grapes. On the south doorway, leaves mingling with rich geometric patterns are likely to refer to eternal life - this was a second meaning applied to foliage. All foliage at Fridaythorpe has reversed relief, that is, the outline has been retained as a ridge and the object is hollowed out.

Another priest

At Copgrove (Yorkshire) is the so-called Devil's Stone (Fig. 3) which has been reset in the



2(b).

Fig. 2. Details of the chancel arch at Salton (a, top of page) and the tympanum at Austerfield (b). Both sites in Yorkshire. At Austerfield the bread and grapes are within a recessed panel, the top of which has a series of arches: this is understood to represent a church interior. Photographs by John McElheran and Michael Tisdall.

outside wall of the nineteenth-century vestry. Previous suggestions as to its subject - ranging from Vulcan and his forge to the captain of a football team - say more about the period in which they were made than about the sculpture.The face and disc-like head resemble some pre-Conquest sculpture as well as Norman work locally. In contrast to the blurred facial features, the carving on the legs is so deep and relatively sharp that it can safely be said to be later and, together with three pits about the head, is probably due to vandalism. The figure has only secondarily come to resemble a 'sheela-na-gig', but originally there would have been another priest standing very like the one at Fridaythorpe (Fig. 4). The Copgrove priest holds the wafer downwards, just as Christ holds out a bread to St Denis in an illumination in a mid-eleventh century missal. However, this position of the arm might be evidence of the difficulties craftsmen had with figure drawing, as in similar poses at Danby Wiske (Yorkshire) and Little Paxton (Cambridgeshire).

Fig. 3. The reset stone at Copgrove. Photograph by John McElheran for the *Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland.*

The tau cross, to the left of the figure, was used in the early Norman period in the chapels of Durham Castle and the Tower of London. According to Emile Mâle, who cites the *Glossa ordinaria*, medieval theologians believed that the tau cross was painted in blood on their doorways by the Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 12.7). The sacrificial lamb which supplied this blood was identified with Christ (1 Cor. 5.7). The tau cross at Copgrove may therefore represent Christ's blood, the wine of the Eucharist.

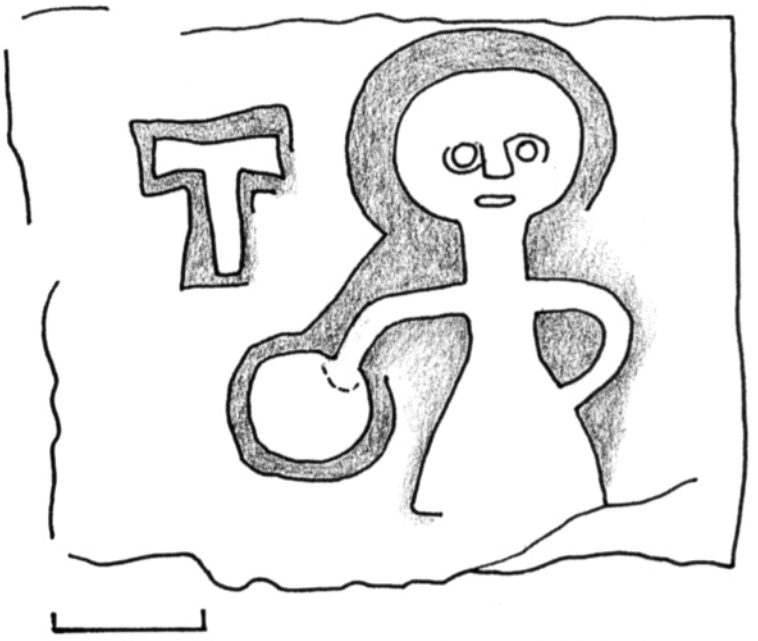


Fig. 4. The reset stone. Reconstruction on a tracing by the author. (All line drawings have a 100mm scale bar.)

A moment in the Mass

The church at Wordwell (Suffolk) has a tympanum on the north doorway with long-necked figures similar to that at Copgrove, and a clump of foliage and a figure like those at Fridaythorpe (Fig. 5). There is reversed relief in the wafer as well as in the foliage, causing it to be seen as a ring. The figure on the left has been recognised by George Zarnecki as an *orant*, a worshipper standing in the ancient posture for prayer. Zarnecki has ascribed the building of the church at Wordwell and its simple sculpture to a travelling Italian stonemason.

The orant is a layman who wears a gown reaching to about mid-calf, whereas the priest wears a long gown. The tympanum shows an actual event, the response of the parishioner at the elevation of the consecrated wafer. The *illiterati* followed the Latin service by 'reading' the actions of the priest and responding with their appropriate actions and private prayers. Some time in the twelfth century a vernacular mass book was compiled, probably in Norman-French and in the province of York, as an aid to worship for such people. Unfortunately, this text survives only in later versions. *The Lay Folk's Mass Book* suggests that a suitable posture at the elevation was to be kneeling and holding up both hands, but this may

well be a revision by the late fourteenth-century translator for, at the time the book was written, the congregation would have been standing throughout this part of the service. Since the motif of the priest with wafer is found in a similar form in both Yorkshire and Suffolk, could it be that the original books were illustrated and were used as models at these sites? A mass book would have been more useful with pictures - though it would seem that they were just as simple as the carvings.

The most unusual thing about the tympanum at Wordwell is not the fact that it faces inwards, which seems to be due to Teulon's restoration, but rather that it shows an event in what we call the 'real' world: it illustrates a moment in time. The more sophisticated but contemporary tympanum on the south doorway faces outwards in the usual way and, like many others, shows the Tree of Life with an animal on either side of it. That is a promise of Paradise and it is presented in the symbolic mode, the norm for Romanesque sculpture. In the reveal of the right-hand capital of this south doorway is a small figure of a man carved *en cuvette* like the tympanum over the north doorway (Fig. 6). He is not a 'stick-man' like the others, but of better proportions. He wears a gown which has wide, full sleeves hiding his hands. Sleeves were tight-fitting except on rich or ceremonial clothing, so he is probably a priest. St Peter is similarly dressed in a pre-Conquest relief at Daglingworth (Gloucestershire), another carving which shows Italian influence according to Zarnecki.

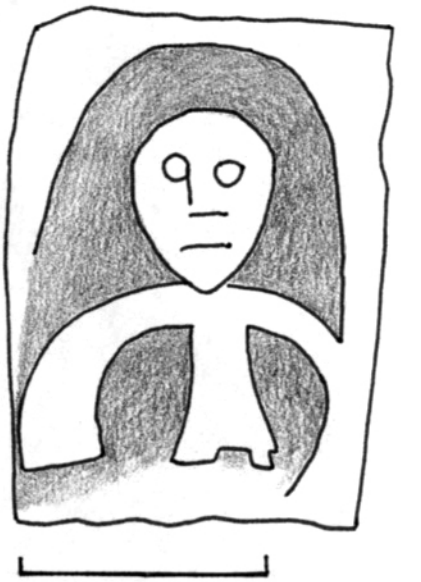


Fig. 6. The figure on the reveal of the south doorway at Wordwell. From a tracing.

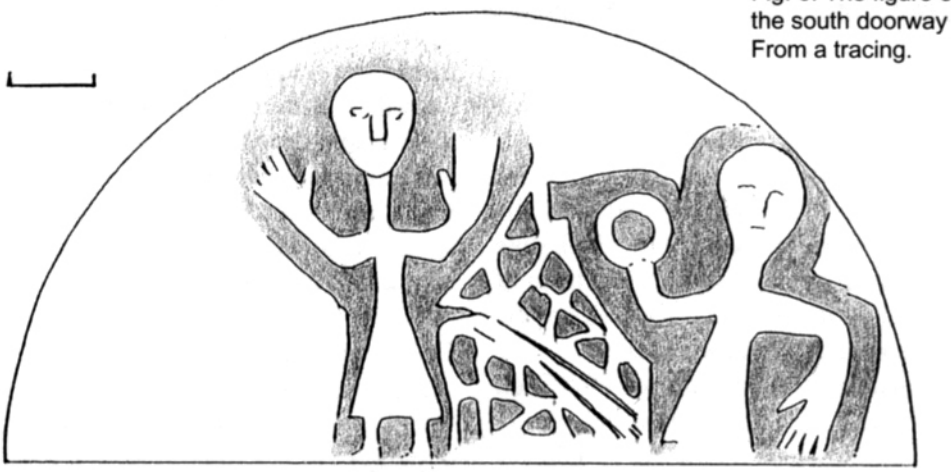


Fig. 5. The tympanum on the north doorway at Wordwell. The lowest 20-30mm of the tympanum is hidden by a shelf. From a tracing.

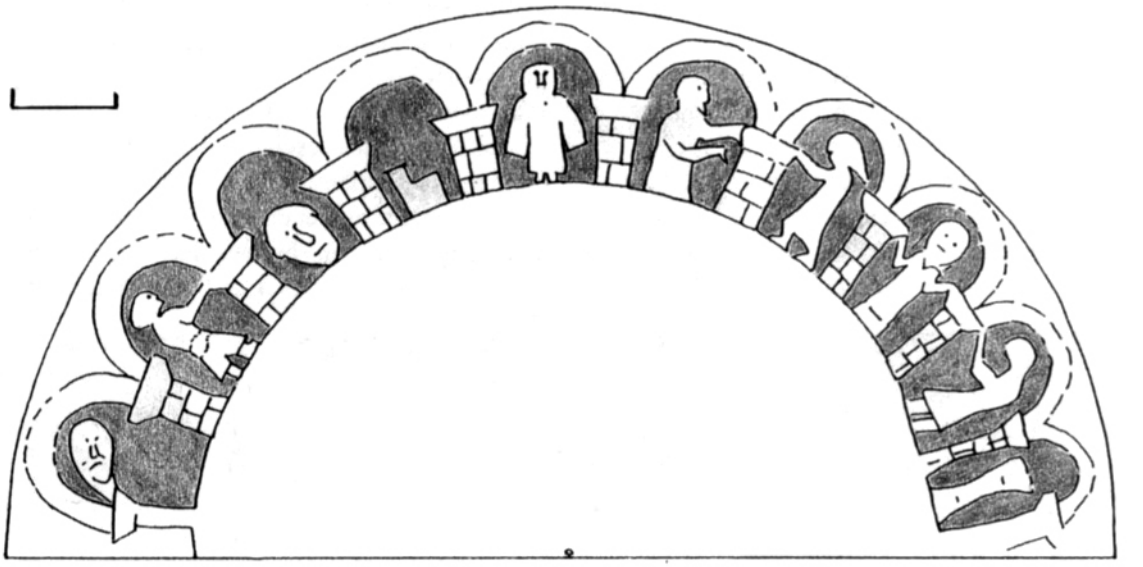


Fig. 7. The tympanum at Pampisford. From tracings.

Fig. 8. The font at Darenth, Kent. Photograph by Michael Tisdall.

More people in the church

A very similar little figure is found at the church at Pampisford (Cambridgeshire) which, like Wordwell, is about 20 miles from Ely. The form of the capitals on the doorway is the same, as are the dimensions of its puzzling tympanum (Fig. 7). The suggestion was made in 1887 that the ten motifs tell the story of John the Baptist, but I would like to suggest the carving shows contemporary people in a realistic church. It is only the assumption that Romanesque sculpture must be either symbolic or decorative that has prevented recognition of this. In the eleventh century, churches were shown in longitudinal section when an interior view was required, as is Westminster Abbey on the Bayeux Tapestry. In the New Minster register, monks are shown watching a ceremony from within a seven-bay arcade.

The central figure at Pampisford is similar to that on the capital of the south doorway at Wordwell, and with long sleeves and long gown he too is likely to be a priest. The first and third arches from the left contain heads looking out, just like faces in a modern cartoon. The remaining figures are similar in style to the central figure and all are carved flat on a flat background. The second opening from the left has a man grasping a capital of the arcade. The detail is weak but he may be wearing a 'belt of strength'. This was once an attribute of Odin, but by this period it merely served to indicate that its wearer was strong - it is worn by giants trying to sink the Ark on the frieze at Lincoln cathedral - while personal strength was no doubt a characteristic of the man third from the left in Fig. 13, whose belt can just be seen.

The fourth bay of the arcade on the tympanum at Pampisford contains an object which, in the absence of linear perspective, could be an altar. Its step and table-top slab are indicated and should be compared to the illumination in the *Missal of St Denis*. To the right of the figure of the priest are five more arches. Four of these contain figures, one of whom definitely grasps a capital, while the others could be in some attitude of prayer, though, perhaps by chance, they appear to touch the capitals. The object in the last of the arches resembles the font in the baptism scene carved at Darenth (Kent), though both are more slender than any surviving Norman font (Fig. 8). A puzzle remains as to what, if anything, was painted in the central semicircular space. The sizeable empty space on the left of the Wordwell tympanum (Fig. 5) may have had something painted in it.

Easter services

The closest parallel for scenes of people in an actual church is with the well-observed, realistic drawings in the *Exultet* rolls of Norman south Italy and Sicily. In these, crowds of ordinary men and women fill arcades; clergy with their wide sleeves are distinctive; and in one instance a woman labelled *Mater Ecclesia* touches the arch with both hands like the possibly-female figure in the eighth bay at Pampisford. The drawings were made for the people to look at while the service of the Easter vigil was read from the accompanying text. Perhaps the carvings at Pampisford are evidence for another travelling Italian stonemason, one who had regularly seen the drawings in use in his younger days and reproduced them here,

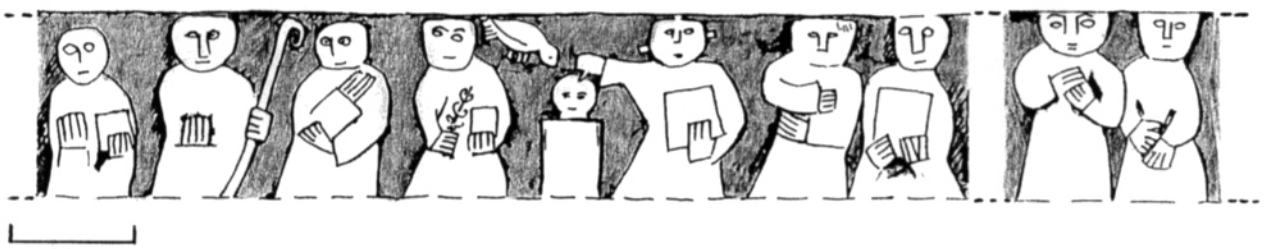


Fig. 9. The upper register of the font at Kirkburn, Yorkshire. The two biblical scenes have been omitted. From a measured drawing by the author.

filling in two odd spaces with his own self-portrait.

Baptisms were an integral part of the Easter service, and it is on fonts in England that other groups of ordinary people are sometimes pictured. The font at Kirkburn (Yorkshire) illustrates what are probably scenes from the Easter vigil and baptism (Fig. 9). The Austin canons, who cared for Kirkburn, are known for their *scriptoria* and may well have had an *Exultet Roll* to hand. The Easter vigil begins, to the right of *Christ in a mandorla*, with a cleric holding a book and a bishop with his crozier - a bishop was required to have blessed the oil for the chrism which was poured into the baptismal water. To the right again is a layman (without a book and suitably awestruck). The next scene shows a man holding a candle and a book - this is the deacon who sings the *Exultet*, a hymn in praise of light. The baptism of a child follows, performed by Christ (with a stubby cross-halo) in the presence of the Holy Spirit. That Christ rather than a priest is the officiant accords with a text of St Augustine. Two more layfolk are then shown. Next is the scene of *Christ giving the keys to St Peter*, and lastly two more of the congregation, with their hands clasped. The figures attempt more natural expression than those at Pampisford and, if they were a little elongated, would be quite realistic.[1]

Fig. 10. The font at Toller Fratrum: a procession. Photograph by Michael Tisdall.

The font at Toller Fratrum (Dorset) shows six adults and two children, but they are not at a recognizable Easter service nor linked to a known manuscript. However, as is suitable on a font, they make symbolic gestures of adherence to Christ and his Church: grasping a pillar; processing after a cross (Fig. 10); holding onto the cable band above them, while the children grasp the arms of the adults (Fig. 11). The central figure has been observed naturalistically - the hem of his dress rides up because his arms are raised. On a font at Stoke Canon (Devon) are men grasping a cable band. Figures grasping a band above them are also seen on a capital reused in the crypt of York Minster, where they alternate with foliage.

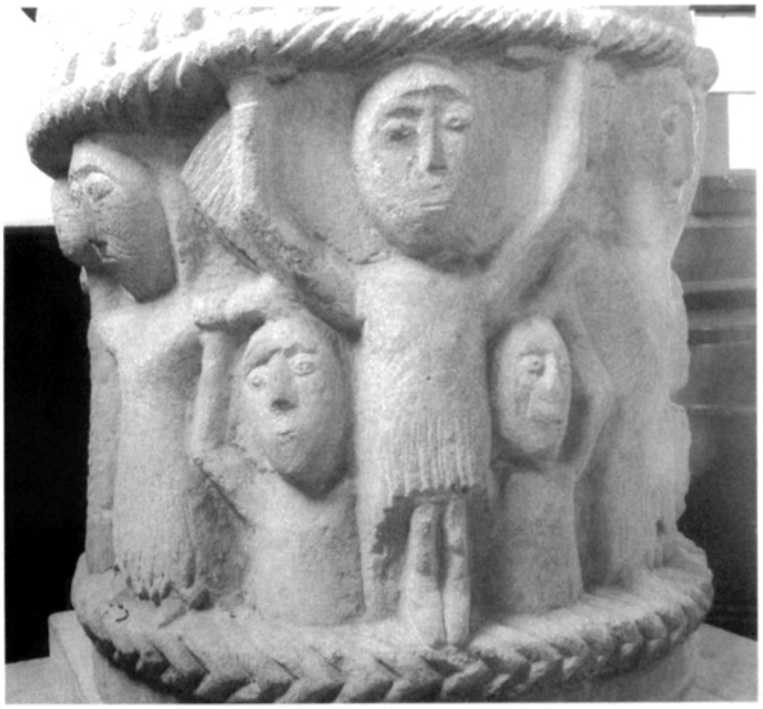


Fig. 11. The font at Toller Fratrum: the faithful. Photograph by Michael Tisdall.

Layfolk from the later twelfth century

A font at Thorpe Salvin (Yorks) has several lively scenes. Four are 'labours of the months', but one scene is an apparently realistic baptism which takes place under two bays of an arcade (Fig. 12). In the left bay is a priest who is symbolic of the Church (he has the three-fold papal tonsure). A tiny child is in his hands. The font is lined up below the central column, which has been placed to rise out of it. In the right bay are four adults including at least one woman, all well wrapped up in cloaks and hoods. These people each hold out an arm

[1] It is probably an Easter baptism which is shown on the font in the church of St. Isidoro, Léon, Spain. See M. F. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture* (Oxford, 1981), 64, 65; ill. 42.

Fig. 12. The font at Thorpe Salvin: a baptism. Photograph by Michael Tisdall.

Fig. 13. The south doorway at Healaugh: family group.
Photograph by George Gregory for *The Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*.

towards the font, two of them touching the column and one the arch. It would seem that, again, touching the building had a symbolic meaning - association with Christ as 'column', perhaps, or to signal an acceptance of being 'built into the church' by baptism, as the apostles described it. The figures at Pampisford who seem to touch a capital may make a similar reference to Christ, this time as the 'corner stone'. It is unlikely that the carvings record an actual ceremonial of touching which involved parishioners.

A striking carving of a family or household group is at Healaugh (Yorkshire). It shows six seated adults with a child acclaiming Christ at his Second Coming (Fig. 13). A source for several features of the carvings here was in Spanish *Beatus* manuscripts, and in them contemporary people were often shown reacting to the sudden appearance of Christ their Judge with either acclamation or fear. Several generations of the Haget family are recorded as local benefactors, so they would be hopeful of acceptance! The sculpture is full of detail, like the carved scrollwork on the wooden seats, the fashionable cuffs worn by the woman on the right but not by the woman with the child on her lap, and the way the central couple sit arm in arm and have footstools. The man facing right wears a 'belt of strength', as mentioned above, and he and the man opposite carry short staffs of office.

Conclusion

The immediacy of the observations preserved in these various carvings is recognizable and appealing, yet there are very few examples without some additional symbolic element. The sculptor was subject to the overriding purpose of Romanesque art which was to surpass the temporal and present a greater, spiritual, reality. We are closer to the twentieth-century idea of reality as something we can 'relate to' if we consider the craftsmen themselves, who, whether local or well-travelled, drew as children or untrained adults still do, and were content with stick-men or just enough accuracy to convince and entertain.

Further reading

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Glossary

en cuvette	on a sunken panel
reveal	internal side of opening or recess
sheela-na-gig	medieval carved female figure with legs wide apart, displaying genitalia
soffit	under surface of arch
tympanum	semi-circular panel over a door, between lintel and arch, usu.carved
voussoir	wedge-shaped or tapered stone forming part of an arch