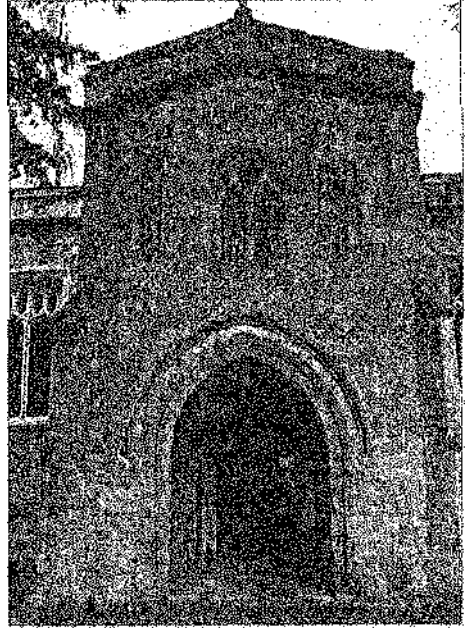


Annunciation Relief, St Mary the Virgin, Shipton

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THE following article is reproduced from a short essay on depictions of the Virgin Mary in medieval art. The building under discussion is the medieval church at Shipton-under-Wychwood, the construction of which dates from around 1200. The church is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The south porch is a later fourteenth-century addition, like so many Cotswold church porches. The pair of low relief sculptures which are the subject of the article are inset in two niches above, and to the sides of the portal. The niche to the right of the portal shows the Annunciation with the angel Gabriel making known to Mary that she will give birth to the Christ child: that on the left has been mutilated and cannot therefore be identified with accuracy.



The exterior of the porch with the niches above the entrance: St. Mary the Virgin, Shipton-under-Wychwood

Ave Maria, gratia plena.
Dominus tecum,
Benedicta to in mulieribus. Et
benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus

Hail, Mary, full of grace.
The Lord is with thee.
Blessed art thou among women,
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus

I have three reasons for choosing this portrayal of the Annunciation, firstly because it is my own parish church and like so many Cotswold churches, is a distinguished medieval monument; secondly because I find the portrayal

of the Annunciation untouched by the influence of the Apocryphal gospels' one of the most powerfully moving and evocative images in the rhetoric of salvation; thirdly, because it is something of an exception to find sculptural relief of this quality still in its parochial church setting. Inevitably, lack of documentation on the sculpture means that this discussion is more of a muse than an investigation.

I shall first place the image in the context of the building history, then briefly discuss the object itself and finally attempt to achieve some understanding of its liturgical and popular framework.

Archaeological excavations of the 1980s in the adjacent Prebendal indicate that there was a total rebuilding of the church in the Romanesque period, the earliest fabric of which dates from around 1200. The first documented reference to Shipton is 1086. Shipton seems to have been established as a 'minster church' in later Anglo-Saxon times and at the manorial centre of an administrative area. Later, in the thirteenth century, the church and its endowments created a 'prebend', or maintenance, for a canon of Salisbury cathedral. The fourteenth-century two-storey south porch, with the images in their niches which are part of the fabric, would have constituted the regular and most visible new access in preference to the twelfth-century west doorway which would no doubt have been used ceremonially and liturgically on feast and holy days..

One can only speculate whether the dedication to St Mary inspired the portrayal in this prominent position, but certainly the popular cult of the Virgin in England is well documented, particularly from the thirteenth century. There is also the metaphor of Mary as the Gateway, with the Annunciation at the beginning of the christological narrative. St Bernard calls her the 'Door' and in the zeal of scholastic poetry she is exalted as in the following verses:

C'est le tuyau, c'est le conduiz
par ou tout est aconduiz.

She is the way, the guide
through which all is led.

or

The prophet Ezekiel
in his boke it witnesseth wel
thou art the gate so stronge, so stel
as ever is het from manne.²

Ezekiel the prophet testifies well
that you are the gateway both strong
and safe
that ever man can have
(translation of last two lines not verified)

M. D. Anderson tells us that in an age of faith, the wealth of an area was reflected in its churches. It is thus less than surprising to find an exceptionally fine, if severely damaged sculpture here in Shipton at this time. Pevsner refers

to 'the Virgin in a swaying Gothic pose with elegant drapery'. In a region of abbeys like Eynsham and Bruern, where, at Taynton, was to be found some of the finest ashlar stone in the country, sculptural workshops would have existed in some of the religious houses. No doubt designs were handed down and adapted by these provincial masons and such patterns appear again and again in the wall-paintings of many parochial churches.

Sculpture on the other hand is a more 'valuable' medium and may indicate higher status. And indeed, the fact that the work itself is an isolated and most visible image seems to confirm that importance. The reliefs are placed under crocketed canopies in niches, about 1.5 by 0.5 metres, on the left and right above the outer porch door, (damage to the sculptures probably dates back to the Reformation's destructive period). The angel's wings are in lower relief. The two figures fit closely under the framing canopy. There is no other image, lily or distaff, to distract from the gesturing angel approaching the Virgin although the traces of pigment which can be distinguished indicate that perhaps some of the conventional fourteenth-century iconography may originally have been painted on to the image. (Although the simplicity of this version of the Annunciation is so powerful, one feels perhaps that a borrowing from the Byzantine image of Mary with her distaff would have been particularly appropriate to a Cotswold wool church!)

The Gothic windows rather sketchily incised to either side of the Annunciation figures are more reminiscent of stained glass as a model than wall painting. Both figures are haloed and traces of colour remain at the upper levels which would have further enhanced the image.

One or all of the factors already referred to may have combined to place this fine, if severely damaged, sculptural relief in such a key position. I think, moreover that one has to insist on the importance of the porch as the carrier of the sculptures. Here it is ribbed and vaulted with crowned head-stops. There are stone benches each side and a niche in the wall on the right-hand side, a similar niche in the chamber above. Chaucer reminds us that porches would have been the fulcrum of the life of the community. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale* Chaucer comments that 'husbandes at church door she hadde fyve'. Not only a ritual and liturgical focus but the whole gamut of life, death, education, justice, sanctuary and drama were seen in the porch.



The Angel Gabriel visits Mary,
under canopy

Thus the whole community would have regularly passed beneath and glanced up at the figures over the entrance; the images themselves would have been instantly recognisable, while having an innately storytelling function. How then would this portrayal have been 'read', and 'read' rather than 'viewed' must be used advisedly. In an age where literacy was exceptional, images were 'the bookes of unlearned men that can no letters',³ and the fourteenth century saw perhaps the greatest popular flowering of metaphorical significance in relation to the Virgin herself and to her place in the liturgical calendar.

In the canonical Gospel accounts, Mary speaks only four times. This type of representation without its accrued apocryphal additions is the most faithful to those accounts. Here, it fuses form and content to the highest degree, the Gothic sway of the figure of Mary fulfilling the idea of her 'trouble' and acceptance, 'be it unto me according to thy word', the tension and resolution within the image expressing exactly the dilemma of Mary within the Annunciation narrative.

The gestures of the participants here follow a sequence recognisable from a very early period. It combines 'showing' and 'relating'. In this isolated position, it cannot be viewed as part of the Gospel narrative although no doubt the interior would have expressed that narrative in the different media as well as in the recital of the Office of the Virgin; but it would have been a reminder of the first chapter in the Virgin's 'Joys' and 'Sorrows' and emphasised the Virgin's role as *theotokos* or 'bearer' of the son of God. I would suggest then that its function here might have been iconic and in a popular sense, devotional, as much to be 'viewed' as 'read'.



Damaged figure,
unidentified

Before entering the porch, people would here have been reminded of the Virgin's role as mediator by virtue of her role as mother. The simple image of humility and simplicity and 'trouble', the image of the human reaction in the face of divine intervention, in opposition to earlier conceptions of her as Queen of Heaven would have accorded well with the popular cult of the Virgin as intercessor for their sins. The image with its double function established the code containing one of the most successful propaganda tools in Christian ideology, the setting up of a contrast between *Eva peccatrice* (original sin) and redemption through the figure of a Virgin. Nicola Coldstream tells us that 'the most powerful intercessor in any church was not the main saint but ... the Virgin Mary'. The church in nearby Chipping Norton is also dedicated to St Mary.

Viewed through the prism of seven centuries can this relatively **small** relief in its niche really deserve such an elevated interpretation? Perhaps M. Camille puts the question in its proper perspective:

From baptism to burial the local parish Church structured people's lives and it is impossible to understand Gothic art without an awareness of how this Christian ideology sought to control minds as well as bodies.'

E. Duffy says much the same when he discusses the effects of the Reformation on communities and reflects on the 'dissolution of the elaborate symbolic framework with which the life of these communities had been shaped for generations'.

In conclusion, no words of mine can better the following verses from these relatively contemporary lyrics which seem to sum up something of the iconic status and allegorical significance of such an Annunciation figure in a parochial church setting and the devotion which it might have inspired in the minds and hearts of generations of Cotswold people.

From the twelfth century 'Hymn to the Virgin

Sainte Mary•e.. christes bur.
Maidenes clenhad, moderes flux, Dille
min sinne, rix in min mod, Bring me
to winne with the self God.'

Holy Mary. bower of Christ,
Purest of maidens. flower of mothers,
Wash away my sin, reign in my heart,
Bring me to joy with God.

From the thirteenth century

All this world was forlore
Eva peccatrice
Till our Lord was ibore
De to genetrice
With Ave it went away
Thuster night and cometh the day
Salutes
The welle springeth out of thee
Virtutis,⁷

All this world was lost
By the sin of **Eve (Eva)**
Till our Lord was born,
Born of you
With 'Ave', sin went away
After night comes the morn,
Greetings,
You are the wellspring,
Of Virtue.

(Note the deliberate pun on Eva/Ave)

Sadly, and ironically, it was precisely this inflated Mariolatry which led **to** the desecration of the scene from Mary's life, and one wonders whether the headless figure on the left of the porch **was in fact Mary herself**

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Notes

' The Apocryphal gospels are a collection of early Christian writings around the life of Christ and the Apostles, not included in the ecclesiastically accepted twenty-seven books of the New Testament, as opposed to the official gospel canon, the 'Canonical' gospels

Probably Milian of Shoreham 'A Song to Mary, verse 2, Medieval English Lyrics

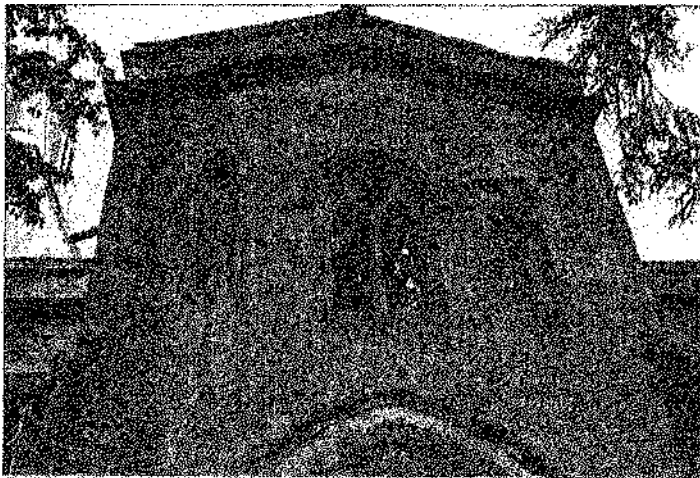
Henrius Injunction amended in 1538 to delete this quotation

Gothic Visions, p.14, M. Camille

The Stripping of the Altars, page 467, E. Duffy

‘A Cry to Mary’, St Godric, Medieval English Lyrics

‘A Hymn to Mary’. Medieval English Lyrics



The exterior of the porch with the niches above the entrance,
St Mary the Virgin, Shipton-under-Wychwood