The west portal and its sculpture

For anyone interested in medieval architecture, especially for anyone who prefers Romanesque to Gothic, Rochester Cathedral's best-known feature is likely to be the twelfth-century sculpture – the tympanum with its lintel and the pair of column-figures – which adorns the west portal. The sculpture is mentioned, and usually illustrated too, in every book about English Romanesque.[1] Some years ago, in a book which aimed to make sense of the church's history over the period from 1076 till 1214, I had occasion to discuss this sculpture myself, but only rather briefly (Flight 1997, pp. 161–2). Here I am proposing to expand on those remarks.[2]

How many pieces of sculpture there are depends on how one counts them. The lintel consists of eight pieces, fitted together with semicircular joggles: the shapes of these joggles, far from being concealed, are emphasized by the carving on the outward surface. The tympanum too is assembled from several pieces (ten, as far as I can tell), a fact which often goes unmentioned.[3] Unlike the components of the lintel, these pieces were meant to fit together invisibly, but erosion has opened up the joints. The column-figures are also in two pieces each, but that appears to be unintentional, the result of subsequent breakage. (Even so, it might be worth asking how and when the breakages could have occurred.) These fractures or joints, whichever they may be, are shown distinctly in the fine engravings made by George Hollis from his son Thomas Hollis's drawings (Hollis and Hollis (1840–2): there is one through the male figure's shins and one through the female figure's knees. They seem to have been patched up to some extent since then.

The sculpture is badly weathered, and I do not know that anyone would dare to decide whether it is or is not all the work of a single artist (or single workshop). Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that the pieces are all connected with one another, physically or thematically or both. Certainly the tympanum and lintel belong together. The tympanum is a sermon in stone on the theme of the Last Judgement: Christ in a full-body halo held up (like a hoop) by two angels,[4] surrounded by the emblems of the four evangelists.[5] The small figures appearing on the lintel, because there are twelve of them and because they have haloes, are sure to be the apostles: they are participants in the same scene. The column-figures are physically separate from the sculpture over the portal as well as from one another, but it seems to be agreed that they are thematically linked. In fact, the identification of these figures as Solomon and the queen of Sheba involves the assumption that they were meant to form a pair, and that together they were meant to be part of the scene depicted in the tympanum.[6] (The identification was first suggested by Lethaby (1904, pp. 175–7); as far as I know, everyone accepts it.) By contrast, the sculptured elements that occur in other parts of the façade – archivolts,

capitals, miniature tympana and so on (McAleer 1999, pp. 61–3) – seem to be just gratuitous decoration. Thematically speaking, there is no specific connection between the fantastic animals and plants represented here and the image of Christ in Majesty.

Furthermore, there has often been thought to be some stylistic disjunction between the sculpture and the rest of the west front. Looking for parallels to the design of the façade in general and of the portal (excluding the sculpture) in particular, one finds oneself travelling towards west-central France – towards Poitou or some neighbouring region. Looking for parallels to the sculpture, one finds oneself travelling in a different direction, towards Île-de-France. In time as well as space, these paths seem not to coincide. The dating may be vague, and may vary from one writer to another; but it has, I think, been generally felt that some chronological discrepancy exists between the sculpture and the rest of the front. For example, Musset (1983, p. 225) took the view that the west front dates from about the 1160s, but that the sculpture was not finished till later – not until after some significant lapse of time, which, for him, meant fifteen years or so. ('Sans doute', said Musset; in fact he said it twice.) McAleer, on the other hand, who used to be troubled by the same dilemma (McAleer 1963, 1984), is troubled by it no longer. His verdict now is that the whole façade, sculpture included, can be dated to around 1150–5 (McAleer 1999, p. 75). But the weight of opinion is, or at least it used to be, on the other side.

For the argument I want to make, not all of this need be true; but I think we can safely assume that some of it is. We can work on the assumption that the sculpture forms (at one level) a single unit, and that this unit is thematically disconnected, and perhaps stylistically divergent, from the rest of the façade in which we find it embedded.

There are two points which I would wish to stress more strongly than I did before. First, I think it certain that the sculpture was inserted into the portal at some later date. It was not part of the original design; it was added as an afterthought. The indications are clearest with respect to the lintel. On either side of the arch, two voussoirs have been removed from the innermost order, so as to make a slot for the end of the lintel – a slot which is neither quite the right size nor quite the right shape. That seemed obvious to me many years ago, as soon as I started looking at things with an archaeological eye; the last time I looked, it still seemed obvious to me. What is true for the lintel must be true for the typanum too. As for the column-figures, again the indications are clear enough. On either side of the doorway, most of the innermost shaft had to be removed before the column-figure could be inserted; only the bottom section is still in situ. The shaft-ring (the carved band which ought to be positioned halfway up) was cut out – and then it was reinserted at a lower level, so as to form a pedestal for the figure.

The second point did not begin to dawn on me until I was working on the final revision of my book. For that reason it is only mentioned there in one diffidently worded footnote (Flight 1997, p. 162). But I feel fairly sure by now that it is right, and it needs to be stated more positively than that. The sculpture did not originate here at all: it was acquired at second hand. It was initially designed for a larger portal than this one, and so had to be cut down in size before it would fit.[7] This is most obviously true with respect to the tympanum, which was intended for a larger space (perhaps a full semicircle) than the space into which it has been uncomfortably inserted here, with Christ's haloed head pressed up against the arch.[8]

As soon as one starts to consider this possibility, one finds that one has to face up to some drastic implications. First, the dating of the sculpture becomes an entirely separate question from the dating of the façade. If I were to say that the sculpture is earlier than the façade, the structural evidence would not prove me wrong (though I am willing to concede that the stylistic evidence might). Second, the date of its insertion here becomes entirely uncertain. If I were to say that the sculpture was inserted in the fifteenth century, I do not see how anyone could contradict me. Third, we have to face the question where the sculpture came from. It can hardly be supposed that there was a second portal anywhere in Rochester larger and more elaborately decorated than the portal in the west front; so the sculpture must have come from elsewhere. The obvious answer would be that it came from Christ Church in Canterbury; but there is at least one alternative source (I am thinking of Faversham) which ought to be considered.[9] Once we have decided on its location, we shall have to go on to ask when this other portal might have been dismantled, so that the sculpture became available for someone to carry it off to Rochester; and that, indirectly, may give us an answer to the second question. And before we have finished we shall have to ask who did it, why he thought of doing it, and how he could get it done.[10]

If the existing portal is a palimpsest, moreover, we need to think of reconstructing (on paper or virtual paper) the two separate portals which went to make it up. Portal 1 – the portal built at Rochester in the mid twelfth century – is easy to reconstruct.[11] We remove the sculpture from over the doorway and restore the missing voussoirs in the innermost order; we remove the column-figures, put the shaft-ring back where it belongs, and replace the missing sections of the shafts. That is all. Portal 2 – the portal for which the sculpture was originally made – will not be so easy to reconstruct, but I hope that someone with the right qualifications will feel inspired to try, even though the result may consist very largely of dotted lines.[12] Only an expert should try that – but the two basic questions are not of a kind which only experts can answer. Readers, I hope, will look at the evidence for themselves and form their own conclusions. Has the lintel been inserted? Has the tympanum been

cut down in size to make it fit?

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NOTES

[1] Recent publications include Kahn (1987), Bliss (1994), and McAleer (1999); useful summaries of the earlier literature are supplied by McAleer (pp. 230–1 for the column-figures, pp. 232–4 for the tympanum and lintel). Give or take a few years, the usual dating for the nave and west front is still that proposed by Clapham (1934): c. 1140 for the nave, c. 1160 for the west front.

[2] A shorter version of this article will form the final section of a paper due to appear in *Archaeologia Cantiana*, correcting and updating some aspects of the book.

[3] But there is nothing abnormal about it. Vergnolle (1994, p. 244) quotes

figures (two or three times as large as this) for some of the more famous French examples.

[4] Because of its shape, this type of halo is sometimes called a *vesica piscis* (Latin for 'fish's bladder') or a *mandorla* (Italian for 'almond'). I do not know that either name has much to recommend it.

[5] The sequence runs anticlockwise from top left. Matthew is a winged man (eroded to the point of being barely recognizable), Mark a winged lion, Luke a winged ox, John an eagle.

[6] There is a scriptural allusion at work here: 'The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgement with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and, behold, a greater than Solomon is here' (Matthew 12:42, cf. Luke 11:31).

[7] The difference would be more a matter of height than of width. (It is given, of course, that the two portals were not of vastly different size: the idea of reusing the sculpture would not have been practicable otherwise.) But I think that at least one end of the lintel had to be cut short too.

[8] To appreciate this point, it may be necessary to have seen some of the comparable French tympana – or pictures of them at least. Coincidentally or not, this idea did not occur to me till some time after I had read the book by Vergnolle (1994), which has an especially good series of illustrations.

[9] The crucial evidence (which favours a Canterbury connection) is a single piece of a joggled lintel, just like the one which is now to be found in Rochester, supposed to have come from the site of Dover priory (Kahn 1987, p. 133, pl. 20). From 1140 onwards, Dover was a cell of Christ Church.

[10] Is it possible that the man who did it was John Langdon? Langdon was professed as a monk of Christ Church in 1399, became a prominent member of the community by about 1410, and was elected bishop of Rochester in 1421; he died in 1434 (Greatrex 1997, p. 217). Does Langdon's career form a bridge between the reconstruction of the west front at Canterbury and a partial reconstruction of the west front at Rochester? I am just posing the question, not prejudging the answer.

[11] For anyone familiar with the portal in its present state, portal 1 is likely to look strange at first. It should be borne in mind that a tympanum is not obligatory – certainly not a stone one.

[12] Is it to be assumed, for instance, that the top of the lintel was flush with the tops of the capitals? In that case how big would the tympanum have to be?

[This is a page-for-page, line-for-line reproduction of an article which was published in Friends of Rochester Cathedral, *Report 2002/2003* (Rochester, 2003), 9–14. I have corrected some misprints but made no material changes. The paper which I thought was forthcoming (note 2) did not come forth, but a shortened version of it is available here. I take no credit for the illustration on page 10, a suberb photograph of the portal in its unrestored state, c. 1880. That image was supplied by the editor, Bob Ratcliffe, from the cathedral archives. I hope I thanked him at the time; in any case I thank him now.]