SCULPTURE AT THE GREEN COURT GATEWAY OF CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL PRIORY

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The structure is contemporary with the Aula Nova and the famous staircase: these three units are all shown on the waterworks map and thought to date from the time of Prior Wibert (c.1152-1167). This complex was built in a novel form to cope with the legal business of the priory. However, a gate on this site had previously existed as this was already the main entrance to the whole precinct and the cathedral. The surviving legible sculpture in its outer arches is discussed here as having motifs relevant to all those entering the priory from the city, not just litigants. In particular, the six medallions not previously identified are suggested to illustrate the after-life of the blessed in paradise, and this choice of subject can be traced to the idea of 'law' as understood by monks.

The gateway has been discussed by Peter Fergusson quite recently in relation to the legal complex which was built at the same time,[1] and this article seeks only to add detail to a minor part of his work. The legal complex comprised a nine bay, two-storey hall with exterior staircase, which was attached at its southern end to a three-storey gateway giving access from the city into the *curia* or working heart of the cathedral priory; these buildings are thought to have been constructed under Prior Wibert, in post *c*.1152 to 1167. The new buildings were to provide for the efficient legal administration of the priory's widespread possessions, and the bounds of the precinct were extended to the north in order to make room for them. The famous waterworks plan shows this development as a gatehouse with turret and, alongside that, the *aula nova*, shortened in this view, but well decorated and with the external staircase which still survives.[2] The new hall included chambers for hearing cases, lodging for visiting lords, servants and others, and a prison; new buildings to service these functions, such as stables and kitchens, for example, must also have existed in this area.

Unlike the *aula nova,* the gatehouse – or *porta curia* on the waterworks plan – was not a novel concept, but would have succeeded an earlier gate on much the same site. This position, in the north-west quarter of the precinct, had been the main entrance into the priory for nearly a century, with a few less important gates elsewhere giving access, for example, to the lay and monastic cemeteries on the south side of the cathedral,[3] and it remained the main entrance until the Christchurch gate was added 1502-20. The Green Court gateway took everything – carts, deliveries of food or stone, visitors on horseback and on foot. On one side of

Fig. 1 View of Green Court gateway. (Photo taken 2010, © Canterbury Archaeological Trust, reproduced with permission.)

the lane to the gate were facilities for monastic charity in the almonry, on the other, the walls and grounds of the archbishop's palace; inside the gate around the court were lodgings for various grades of guests, and workshops, kitchens, brewhouses, stables and stores serving the monastic community.

The Green Court gateway is wide and high (**Fig. 1**), and would have been especially impressive with its upper storeys complete, and before the insertion of the late fourteenth-century cross-wall with its two lesser openings, also before the rise in ground level consequent on changes in the road surface which must have reduced the height by a foot or more to hide the plinth and bases. The gate-hall is impressively deep too; it included gate-keeper's quarters and a door to the prison associated with the law business. Both faces of the gateway have carved decoration, but the outer, west, face is most developed, with decorated windows and oculi as well as the large arch of two orders. Like other sculpture under Prior Wibert,[4] the work is highly skilled, and even florid.

The capitals are damaged and too worn to discuss at length, though they seem to have been of conventional types: on the left are a coiled serpent, a demon holding two lions by the neck, and a wyvern with a foliate tail biting on other foliage; on the right, a mask emitting foliage, and a decorated scallop capital. Both orders of the great archway have a heavy roll moulding set in a plain and square arch: the rolls are fully carved with regular foliage motifs. On the larger roll of the second order there are, however, eight varied medallions irregularly interspersed between the foliage motifs, and it is on these medallions that this paper will focus (see **Fig. 2a-h**). In this

second order, each single motif is formed of at least two stones, and these were so finely fitted that the joint is hardly detectable even now. Perhaps, therefore, the irregularity of the distribution of the medallions was not due to carelessness or lack of inspiration but was a device to draw attention to these figures among the regular foliage. The carvings are mostly well-preserved and their subjects are unusual. For the purposes of the present paper, the medallions are numbered clockwise 1 to 8.

Peter Fergusson was able to show with great exactitude that a manuscript of the *Decretum* of Gratian, a basic legal text, would have been the source for medallions 6 and 8 (Figs 2f and 2h): their subjects are the summoning of litigants by a trumpeter in a tower, and the laws proscribing marriage between close relations.[5] However, suggestions that medallions 1 and 2 might depict King David are rather forced.[6] The man playing an instrument (Fig. 2a) is unlikely to represent King David – he has no crown and he is playing a bowed instrument. Even if there are images of David without a crown, he should be playing something like a harp.[7] Medallion 2, showing a man dancing or leaping (Fig. 2b), similarly is at variance with the text about David dancing before the Ark of God, for that tells us that he was 'girded with a linen ephod' and that he disgusted his wife by uncovering himself as he danced.[8] An ephod is not a well-understood garment, but it was probably for the upper body: in the medallion, the man leaping or dancing is enveloped by a long-sleeved, full-length tunic that leaves only his hands and feet visible. It is almost as though these two carvings went out of their way to avoid specifying David, although playing and dancing was their theme. The initial to Psalm 1 often depicts King David and his musicians, but Fergusson had to admit that the subjects of medallions 3 and 5 (Figs 2c and 2e) are hard to find there, or anywhere.[9]

To advance this problem of identification, it is helpful to return to the busy public context of the carvings. The gateway was contemporary with the new legal facility, and structurally continuous with it, but its primary function was as the principal entrance to the whole monastic precinct and the cathedral. When the sculptural motifs came to be chosen, a wider audience, beyond those on legal business, would have been considered. The gateway was the main entrance from the city to the precinct and, in that sense, it resembles a doorway into a church; its decoration would have been considered not just as a show of splendour, but as a medium to advance the faith. Prior Wibert or someone on his staff had only to look around them for themes and models to fulfil such a purpose: some of the imagery on the gateway, like the foliage motifs and the particular legal imagery identified by Fergusson, would very likely have been copied from the priory's own documents as he suggests,[10] and at least one capital resembled earlier sculpture in the crypt.[11] Those physical objects were convenient and obvious sources for what might be put on the gateway, but the characteristic thought processes of monks were much more subtle, and introspective.

The two medallions explained by Fergusson clearly relate to the new legal buildings, so perhaps the theme for the gate was to be 'the law', how might that concept have resonated with a monk?[12] The *opus dei*, the daily round of services known by heart with words largely from the bible, would automatically be accompanied by echoes in further texts, and more that came in meditation; these services would be a likely source. The word 'law' would undoubtedly bring to mind the words of Psalm 1, which celebrates God as the source of law and employs

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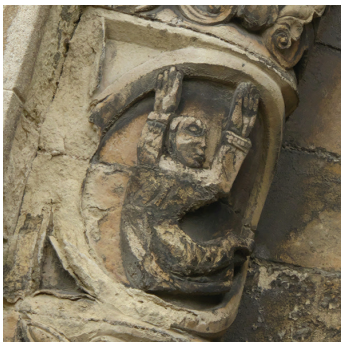
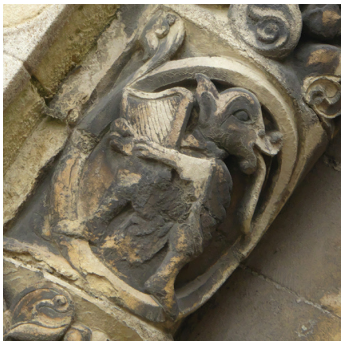
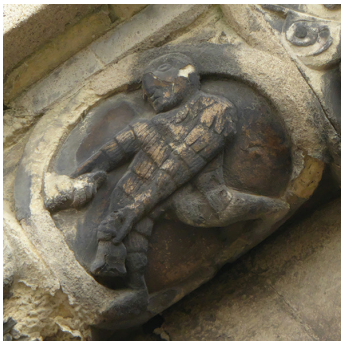
 b

c 

 d

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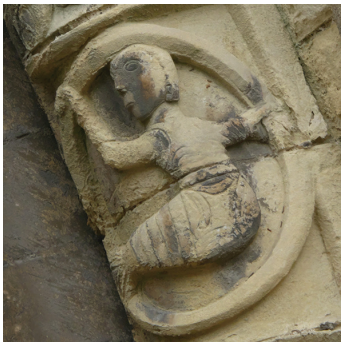
g 

 h

several legal metaphors. This first psalm sets the scene for the whole collection of 150 psalms because it states the basic importance of choosing the right path through life: the path to God, not *via peccatorum*, the way of sinners. Psalm 119, the longest psalm, was similarly influential in forming a monk's conception of 'law': this psalm was repeated daily, section by section in the liturgical hours. Both these prominent psalms include the idea of a metaphorical path through life, which could suitably point up the spiritual significance of the actual gateway. Psalm 119 talks about walking in a 'way' or road 'of the law of the Lord', and the people walking it – the psalmist, the young man, the sojourner on earth, the companion of all who fear God (opposed by princes, the insolent, the godless, oppressors). Almost every verse of 176 verses is of like form, stressing the importance of God's law, word, statutes, commandments, ordinances, precepts, etc., etc.[13] Its formal repetition is a contrast to the vigorous, rhetorical manner of the six verses of Psalm 1, but it equally shaped the idea of 'the law' or *lege Domini* as it was understood by monks.

It is suggested that the six medallions remaining unsolved on the arch were inspired by the text of Psalm 1. In particular, that the medallions picture those 'blessed' who have not walked in the way of sinners (v. 1). The *beatus vir* delights 'in the law of the Lord', and on his law he meditates day and night' (v. 2), but the wicked are like the chaff swept away and burnt at harvest-time (v. 4), they will 'not stand in the judgment', but perish (vs 5, 6). For the Canterbury monks, it was the general resurrection at the end of time and the Last Judgment that would have come to mind in hearing the words 'harvest' and 'judgment'; the words were transformed by the correspondences among biblical texts.[14] It is suggested that the six medallions depict quite literally the rejoicing in Heaven of those who loved 'the law of the Lord' in this life; they have passed safely through Judgment and are rewarded with life after death. The foliage motifs throughout the rest of the two orders might link to v. 3, which likens the righteous man to a fruitful tree flourishing by streams of living water – a picture of Paradise. Verse 6, with its comparison of the paths of the righteous and the wicked, might have been thought of as relevant to those coming through the gate on legal business, but litigants were a minority of those who came there: all were called to avoid the path of sinners.

Monastics saw the Old Testament as a prefiguration of the New, and the New Testament as the completion of the Old.[15] Thus, if Psalm 1 or its initial had brought to mind the author David, even he could be superseded by a perfected model or antitype derived from the New Testament. The Old Testament describes the scene when King David and the men of Israel began to bring the Ark of God towards

Fig. 2 (opposite) The eight medallions of the Green Court gateway (photos by author):

a Medallion 1, a plainly-dressed bearded man, seated and playing a vielle.
b Medallion 2, a man dancing or jumping for joy.
c Medallion 3, a dressed and booted animal playing a harp.
d Medallion 4, a man ringing handbells.
e Medallion 5, a man in a long tunic, bent over backwards juggling with four knives.
f Medallion 6, a man leaning over balcony blowing a trumpet or horn.
g Medallion 7, a mermaid (or merman?).
h Medallion 8, a couple holding a cord.

Jerusalem: 'And David and all the house of Israel were making merry before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals'.[16] This was an earthly rejoicing on a particular occasion, it occurred under the old law, *sub lege.* Compare that with the individuals in the six medallions, who, it is suggested, rejoice eternally in heaven, *sub gratia*. The first four medallions depict music and dancing in a curiously boisterous manner for a monastic gateway, but this is because they are a transformed, eschatological version of David's musicians.

In the Hunterian Psalter of *c*.1170, at the beginning of the book of Psalms, there is an opening relevant to our subject.[17] On the verso page we see King David tuning his harp, preparing to make merry before the Lord (**Fig. 3**, *left*). The several musicians around the king on this folio include players of a rebec and vielle, and others with bells on a rack or in their hands, some singing at the same time, and a piper and a flautist. After all that colour, action and fascinating musicological evidence, the *Beatus* initial itself on the facing recto (Fig. 3, *right*) might appear rather dull – only decorative foliage with two naked men climbing in it, and the usual symmetrical animals, birds and lions – but it is this kind of design, rather than a literal illustration of King David, that seems to have been the more common formula for the *Beatus* initial in the period, and it was certainly not intended to be viewed as an anti-climax. This recto illustrates the eternal blessedness of those who love the law of God, and the six gateway medallions have a similar function.

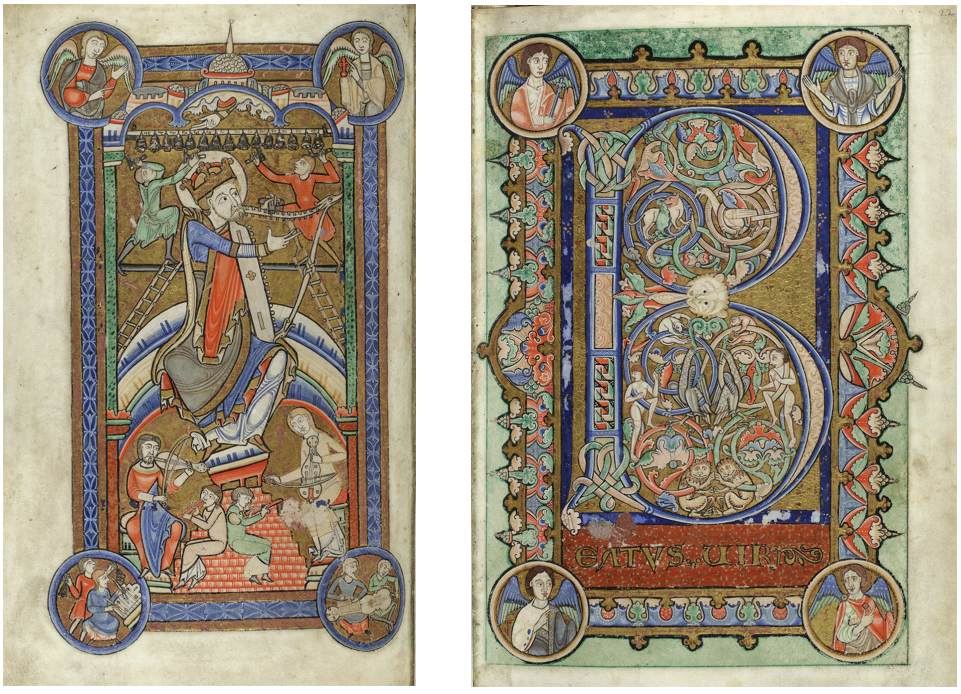


Fig. 3 Opening from the Hunterian Psalter. Left, fol. 21v, King David; right, fol. 22r, 'Beatus vir'. (By permission of University of Glasgow Archives and Special Collections MS Hunter 229.).

King David, with his men of Israel processing towards Jerusalem with the Ark, was making merry in an earthly celebration of the presence of God: the first four characters on the arch are celebrating in Heaven, also in the presence of God, or at least in the plenteous Paradise he has prepared for them. The plainly-dressed bearded man (Fig. 2a) is seated and playing a vielle. He holds the instrument in the downward position, with the neck in his left hand above his shoulder and the bow held in an underhand grip, like one of the musicians in the Hunterian Psalter. The carving is worn, but his chair seems covered with draperies, perhaps giving him a degree of richness and comfort which he had not known before. The dancing man (Fig. 2b) is leaping high in some unprogrammed dance, or jumping for joy perhaps. The next medallion shows a cloaked, trousered and booted animal playing a harp (Fig. 2c). This is neither an actual nor a mythical animal, but could represent a man reborn with a marvellous new body in Heaven.[18] To show the harp being played by an animal, not a man, again prevents any confusion with the standard depictions of King David, but continues to hint at the parallel between his earthly rejoicing, and theirs in Heaven. The creature's long waving tongue is more than a graphic flourish, and would indicate it is singing loudly: this is sometimes seen with lions, as if to show they are roaring.[19] Adding to the noise is a man ringing handbells (Fig. 2d), an instrument also illustrated in the contemporary Hunterian Psalter. This man is wearing a dagged tunic and leggings, as worn by later medieval entertainers or some present-day morris-dancers. When choosing these four characters to be carved for the arch, care was taken to avoid giving the impression that any of them were biblical characters or otherwise special: these are ordinary men shown engaged in familiar music-making, but lifted up high onto a heavenly stage; their ordinariness suggests that the carvings were aimed at anyone who came to the gate and were meant to help them imagine being in Heaven.

Medallion 5, the highest one, shows a man in a long tunic bending over backwards to juggle with four knives (Fig. 2e). He does not belong to the group of musicians, and has a slightly different message from theirs: now that he is living a new life in Paradise, he experiences enhanced skilfulness and amazing agility. St Augustine believed the body will be made perfect at the resurrection,[20] and physical vigour was longingly awaited in religious poetry about Paradise.[21] The juggler is an unusual character for sculpture, and he may have been substituted for an acrobat, which is a more common motif but which here might have too closely resembled the man dancing (Fig. 2b).[22] From this point on round the arch there are eleven foliage motifs, and then the medallion with the trumpeter summoning those with business at the court; the man is shown leaning out over a wooden balcony – perhaps something like what actually happened here on the gatehouse (Fig. 2f).

The last of the unresolved creatures, medallion 7, is a mermaid, modestly shown from the back; perhaps it is a merman since the hair is quite short (Fig. 2g). The creature wears a waistcoat and a floral or starry belt; the placement of the hands, with the thumbs the wrong way round, is occasionally seen in carvings of the period, but probably arose from a difficulty reproducing the pose rather than from some unknown significance. Like the previous five medallions discussed here, this could also represent a person in the afterlife, but in this case the combination of fishy and human bodies would picture a soul re-united with its body. The classical mermaid, a mythical sea-creature, was probably Christianised when adopted by

Gregory the Great as a figure of this reunion at the end of time; he writes of the two 'garments' which will be given to the believer at the general resurrection, garments which he describes as the blessedness of the soul and the glory of the flesh.[23] Pope Gregory's conversion of the pagan imagery of the mermaid, and elsewhere of the centaur, might recall his instruction, sent to his emissary Augustine via Mellitus, to convert the heathen temples he found in Kent to Christian use;[24] recycling seems to have been a pragmatic solution to the prevalence of pagan imagery and practice.[25] The last medallion, with the two standing figures holding what looks like a cord, is formed of three voussoirs; it illustrates the other legal subject clarified by Fergusson (Fig. 2h).[26]

The eight medallions, including those six newly interpreted above, are all in some way related to 'law', with the emphasis on heavenly justice. For those not engaged in legal business, but living their workaday lives and using this gateway, the picturing of life in Paradise and the thought of it could have been enriching.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

1 Fergusson, 'Entry Complex'.

2 Eadwine Psalter, Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R. 17.1, fol 285r; Fergusson, 'Entry complex', figs. 3 and 6.

3 Willis 1868, 4-12.

4 Kahn 1991, 128-135; illus 212, 213, 216, 218, 221, 222.

5 Fergusson 'Entry complex', 97-8, figs 11a and 12. It is particularly fortunate that medallion 8, the carving with the couple holding what looks like a cord, has survived to be identified, as a photo in the Conway Library taken *c*.1980 shows an electricity cable perilously near the cord; the situation is only slightly improved now.

6 Fergusson, 'Entry Complex', 98-9.

7 1 Samuel 16:14-23.

8 2 Samuel 6:20-23.

9 Fergusson, 'Entry complex', 98, 99, 101.

10 Fergusson 'Entry Complex', 101, 103.

11 Compare a capital of *c*.1100 in St Gabriel's chapel in the cathedral crypt, Kahn 1991, pl. IV. Gameson 1992, 40-3, suggests this is one of the most advanced type of carvings in the crypt, and that this and several other capitals inspired manuscript drawings: no interpretations of these bizarre scenes have been suggested.

12 Leclerq 1982, 73-4.

13 Sample terms taken from RSV.

14 For example, re harvest: Matthew 3:12; judgement: Matthew 25:31-46.

15 Leclercq 1982, 79-83.

16 2 Samuel 6:5.

17 Glasgow University Library MS Hunter 229 (U.3.2); illustrations were on-line at 23.3.2021. In citing this manuscript, it is not intended to suggest any link to the sculpture other than approximate contemporaneity.

18 1 Corinthians 15, for example, verses 35-8, 51-2; Wood 2017, 138-9.

19 As on the left capital of the doorway at Upleadon, Gloucs.

20 For example, Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, Book XXII, chs. 14-21.

21 I Cor. 15.43; Leclerq 1982, 59; Wood 2017, 144-6.

22 Wood 2017, 120-21, 129-52.

23 Gregory, *Moralia in Job*, bk. XXXV ch. 25; Wood 2017, 150-1.

24 Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*, 1.30, 1.32.

25 For example, G. Demacopoulos, 'Gregory the Great and the Pagan Shrines of Kent', *Journal of Late Antiquity*, vol. 1, no. 2, Fall 2008, 353-369; Leclercq 1982, 126.

26 Fergusson, 'Entry Complex', 97-8.