



<http://kentarchaeology.org.uk/research/archaeologia-cantiana/>

Kent Archaeological Society is a registered charity number 223382

© 2017 Kent Archaeological Society

ROMANESQUE WALL-PAINTINGS IN THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF CHRIST CHURCH, CANTERBURY

K. FLYNN

INTRODUCTION

The wall-paintings of the Cathedral occurred in: Conrad's Choir, St. Gabriel's Chapel, St. Anselm's Chapel, the Corona, the Trinity Chapel, the Undercroft, St. Andrew's Chapel, and the Infirmary Chapel in the Priory. The Hospice of St. Thomas in the city also holds painting of the period.

In the case of Conrad's Choir the lost work had high praise from William of Malmesbury, who lauded the many-coloured pictures of the walls.¹ Gervase mentioned the 'caelum egregia pictura decoratum',² but neither writer is informative. The undertaking must have drawn in a variety of painters; its influence can only be conjectural, and may be reflected in the murals in the Chapel of St. Gabriel. The synthesis in the latter of English Romanesque and Byzantinizing trends is also found in the fragments of the Infirmary Chapel. Other Cathedral work included the late figures in the Corona³ and in the Trinity Chapel. Copies of these last were made by George Austin before 1848 (i.e. Canterbury Cathedral Library add. MS I, 29-38); they were of faded material and have been thoroughly dealt with by M. Caviness.⁴ Other traces of monumental painting were recorded in 1878, and included the black and white striping on ribs on the vault of St. Andrew's Chapel, with foliate patterning between them; painted cable patterning on the arch

¹ *Gesta Pontificum*, R.S. LII 1870, 138.

² *Opera Historica*, R.S. LXXIII 1897, 13.

³ Gostling, N., *A Walk in and about the City of Canterbury*, 1777, 263.

⁴ Caviness, M., "A lost Cycle of Canterbury Paintings of 1220", *Antiq. Journ.*, liv (1974), 66. Scott-Robertson, C., "Relics of decorative Painting now or formerly in Canterbury Cathedral", *Arch. Cant.*, xxii (1897), 34.

leading from the same chapel to the Choir, painted corbels, and various traces of banding.

In the crypt below the Trinity Chapel were two outlined *Majestas* images with evangelist symbols, traced in shallow markings filled with colour. These were on the east side of the great south-west pillar and on a pier on the north side. There was also the underpainting of a bishop.⁵

The Chapel of Our Lady in the Undercroft, the eastern apse of Ernulf's central alley now walled off by a screen, had 'painted representations of an angelic choir' of unknown date and moulded stars reminiscent of those in the Chapel of the Guardian Angels in Winchester Cathedral.⁶

ST. GABRIEL'S CHAPEL

The most important of the extant paintings are to be found in this chapel, which lies in the crypt directly beneath the Chapel of St. Anselm and belongs to William of Corbeuil's archiepiscopate, and probably coincides with the 1130 dedication of Conrad's Choir. The ceiling of the nave was coated in plaster of about half an inch in depth, and then the entire composition was outlined in red, at times with the aid of a compass. The first painting was made of blue-grey ground and flesh tints, and then final details were applied, much of the painting never penetrating below the surface. The apse schemes was similarly executed, but with an even heavier reliance on technical aids for the complexity of curves and straight lines that structure the work. It was preserved from the severe damage suffered by the nave paintings by a screening wall only recently removed.

The nave ceiling held sixteen large medallions, one in each compartment of the four quadripartite vaults, and flanked by two smaller circles.

The apse vault shows God in a mandorla, seated on a rainbow, and pointing to the right. Four angels act as supporters in the spandrels. God's feet rest over an alcove in the east end of the apse, the soffit of which held nine rectangles showing the seven *Churches of Asia*, each with its Angel and Candlestick, with a ring of seven stars in the top rectangle and St. John is seen writing the Apocalypse in the lowest compartment on the north side.

The north wall of the apse shows the *Annunciation to Zachary* and his confronting the people, while below St. Elizabeth is depicted in bed, holding the child out to neighbours while Zachary writes down the

⁵ Keyser, C., *The mural and decorative Paintings which are now existing or have been in Existence in the present Century at Canterbury*, 1878, annotated as Society of Antiquaries of London Tract 182 no. 9., under "Canterbury".

⁶ Note, *Arch. Cant.*, xiii (1850), 525.

ROMANESQUE WALL PAINTINGS

name of John. On the south wall the scenes are illegible; the uppermost zone probably held an *Annunciation* and *Visitation* with a *Nativity* and *Adoration* below.⁷ Fragments of inscriptions are still visible, and relate clearly to the narrative, apart from a dedication of an altar to St. Gabriel.

ICONOGRAPHY

The dedication of the Chapel is given variously, from the eighteenth century onwards, to St. John the Baptist or to St. Gabriel. The narrative of the Baptist is unusual, but not unexpected of a saint whose popularity in the Middle Ages led to the veneration of twelve heads and sixty fingers as recorded by Réau.⁸ He appears at Canterbury under the licence of type and ante-type in the orbit of Christ's infancy (*Annunciation*, shared *Visitation*, and *Nativity*). Of the Canterbury scenes the *Annunciation to Zachary* belongs to the widest tradition, making its entrance at Canterbury in the seventh century.⁹ Complete infancy cycles for St. John existed in the west well before the tenth century, and the closest comparison to be made with St. Gabriel's Chapel occurs in one of four psalter leaves (New York, Pierpont Morgan Lib. 724) produced at Canterbury, probably at Christ Church, and contemporary with the murals. On the verso of Ms 724 are included the *Visitation*, the *Nativity of John*, the writing of John's name by Zachary, and a *Nativity* of Christ. These appear on the right of the page while a *Tree of Jesse* takes up most of the left side. An *Annunciation to Zachary* appears in its upper branches, with an *Annunciation to the Wedding* of Mary. Thus five or possibly seven of the scenes on the walls of the Chapel are shared with the leaf.

We may take the comparison further, since some of the compositions appear to be mirror images, e.g. the *Annunciation to Zachary* and the scenes of St. Elizabeth in bed. In the latter especially we may note the bed, its drapes, the ends of folds, the marphorion head-dress, and the grouping and attitudes of figures. Similarities are also obvious in the two *Naming* scenes, where the fall of the cloak over the left arm and under the left thigh, the ball-joint of the single leg of the table, and the overall impression, suggest a strong link. Differences occur where wide traditions are available, e.g. in the *Visitation*. Since the Psalter leaf examples are part of an extensive scheme it is possible that the mural painters made use of the leaf or its model. The leaf

⁷ See the James Cole engraving in Dart, J., *The History and Antiquities of the Cathedral Church of Canterbury and the once-adjointing Monastery*, London 1726, 34.

⁸ Réau, L., *L'Iconographie de l'Art chrétien*, Paris 1955, II, 435 et seq.

⁹ Cambridge, Corpus Christi Coll., MS 286, *Gospels* once at St. Augustine's, f. 129.

provides us with one further hint, in that its juxtaposition of these scenes with the *Jesse Tree* suggests an interpretation for the nave medallions with their linking foliage, i.e. the nave ceiling of the Chapel contained a *Jesse Tree* which led towards the infancy cycles of the apse.

Just as the manuscript illumination was topped by a *Majestas*, so too does the figure of God dominate the apse ceiling (or rather did, until the recent tragic loss of face through neglect). Extant English monumental paintings of the period (e.g. Clayton, Patcham, Copford) usually place God in a throne, but illuminations favour rainbows as seats just as readily, and Kempley supplies a mural example. The rainbow is one of the few elements of Ezekiel's vision of the Glory of God which lends itself to illustration, and its pacific symbolism of the covenant apart, is more a matter of style than iconography. God's pointing right hand is a deliberate if incidental reference to the narrative or more especially to the *Annunciation to Zachary* (a scene treated in another fashion in the *Shaftesbury Psalter*, and by 'Pictor in Carmine').

The legend of 'EGO SUM QUI SUM' on the open book of the left hand is the first reference to the Apocalypse met with so far. A more definite classification of the *Majestas* with the first chapter of the vision of St. John is provided by the soffit of the east wall recess, where what is usually scattered in a large setting (as e.g. at Kempley) is narrowed into the discreet confines of the marginal strip. The seven Churches and their angels, etc., are cramped because the Baptist cycle has had to be incorporated into a chronology not its own. Other elements in the apse and soffits of the bifore chancel arch are the remains of a (?) prophet, trees acting as witnesses (*Zechariah*, IV, 14, *Apocalypse*, XI), and the remains of six bust figures of female martyrs.

THE STYLE OF THE PAINTINGS

The characteristics of the St. Gabriel's mural style include backgrounds of blue panelling set on narrow margins of blue/green. The figures have almost oval heads, often with furrowed brows. Hair appears in tight round curls, linear patterns, or with paint worn down to flat areas of colour. It may form a small peak in the centre of the forehead, and often fills the space between nape and shoulder in a hank. Whiskers form light pointed moustaches, heavy pointed beards, or light edgings around the jawline. Eyebrows may be fully rounded or stiffly angular. Noses are long and chiselled with almost pointed tips and delicate nostrils. Ears are drawn in profile or else barely indicated by the lower tip shown projecting from the hair. Lips are pursed. Traces remain on several faces of the red circles painted on cheeks. Hands are generally

long-fingered, with digits curled onto the palm or left flatly open, except where gesturing. Feet are shown in profile or in a slightly awkward three-quarter view.

When bare they are patterned with geometric highlights, and in profile the large toe lies under the second. The naturalism of the full heavy robes and cloaks or over-ropes is hampered by stylized folds and creases; these include nested 'V' folds and repeated ridges. At the same time drapery hooked over the arm or thigh falls easily downwards, and attempts have been made to give movement to the wind-stirred drapery of the angels. Comb-like spikes vertically hatch 'T' folds along lower edges. Jewelled hems, knotted girdles, and shoes decorated with beads are also typical.

In general, figures are set solidly in a shallow plane; they are subject to gravity and skilfully grouped, each having a particular identity. All of these elements have been variously interpreted as Byzantine forms from Italy or the Crusader Kingdom, with only minor associations with a local tradition.¹⁰ In fact, the murals display both introduced Byzantine characteristics and indigenous Romanesque features as employed by two Canterbury artists, the illuminators of the *Dover Bible* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MSS 3 and 4).

The artist of the first volume of the Bible, MS 3, presents us with a series of figures and groups which can be closely associated with some of the characters in the murals. He tends towards naturalism, attaching importance to gestures and glances, and the qualities of cloth and its action mean more to him than its decorative potential. His miniatures of the *Twelve Minor Prophets* afford a number of clear similarities with the murals; they use the same range of faces, gestures, scrolls, and to a slightly lesser extent, costumes. Thus the prophet Nahum (f. 265) provides parallels in hair, whiskers, gesture, and patterning of sleeve between elbow and cuff; the same may be said of Daniel (f. 245v.), Zephania (f. 266v.), Habakkuk (f. 265v.) etc. Other and strikingly close material is to be found in the faces inset in the initial H of f. 26, and f. 91v. shows the typical slightly peering stance and shuffling gait, along with L-shaped arm movements and linking scroll found in the murals.

Panelled backgrounds are also shared, along with the use of pure colours, while the liveliness of the drapery reserved for the apse angels is more widely exploited in the illuminations. It is possible that the painter had looked at the mosaics of the Palatina and the Martorana in

¹⁰ Westlake, N., *An Elementary History of Design in Mural Painting*, London 1905, II, 152 and preceding. Caiger-Smith, A., *English Medieval Mural Paintings*, Oxford 1963, Ch. I. Demus, O., *Romanesque Mural Painting*, London 1970, 509. Tristram, E., *English Medieval Wall Paintings: the Twelfth Century*, Oxford 1944, 14 et seq.

Sicily,¹¹ and whatever his source material he is certainly responsible for the Byzantine elements in the mural style.

The remaining portions of the wall-paintings can be associated with the hand of the illuminator of the second volume of the *Dover Bible* (MS 4). The illustration of MS 4 is superior in quality to that of MS 3. It expresses delight in ritualized attitudes and in surface patterning which ignores the strong hints of naturalism available in Byzantine currents. Anatomy is stylized with hair executed in bold lines, and whiskers pointed and clipped as in some of the mural faces. The marked shading around eyes is another matching point. Other coincident features of MS 4 and the murals are the nested V folds, heavily knotted and long-ended girdles (f. 139v.), fringes of curls (f. 84v.), the method of drawing key-patterns (f. 184), numerous heads seen at a three-quarter angle with the ear in profile, peaks of hair on the forehead, etc.

Differences include the use of a profile clearly based on types occasionally found in the *Eadwine Psalter*, e.g. f. 9, and it is likely that the Bible volume 2 artist worked on the Psalter.¹² Further work by the painter of volume 2 does not seem to have survived beyond that of the murals. His style dominates the crypt, however, as does his palette. Between his work in the Bible and that of his fellow, all of the characteristics of the synthesized style of the murals are paralleled in the illuminations.

By a fortunate coincidence one of the very few pictures left to us of muralists at work in the twelfth century survives in the *Dover Bible* itself (vol. 2, f. 241v.), and may even represent the two painters in question. Given the date of the fabric of St. Gabriel's Chapel (1130), and that of the earliest prophet models of Sicily (1143), the *Eadwine Psalter* (c. 1147), and the *Dover Bible* (c. 1150),¹³ a date between 1143 and 1150 would seem reasonable.

Other work in the orbit of these two painters is to be found in the fragments of the Christ Church Infirmary Chapel; these have been carefully recorded,¹⁴ and the hands, faces, and garb of two angels appear to be similar to those of the vault angels in St. Gabriel's Chapel. One also notes the remains of a key/medallion frieze (compare its diamond inclusions with those of f. 138 of the second volume of the *Dover Bible*), and remains of a probable *Virgin and Child* with robe patterns similar to those of the same Bible volume.

¹¹ Boase, T., *English Art 1100-1216*, 2nd edn., Oxford 1971, 191, 192. Dodwell, C., *The Canterbury School of Illumination*, Cambridge 1954, 86.

¹² Dodwell, C., *ibid.*, 58 et seq. Kauffmann, C., *Romanesque Manuscripts*, 97, 98.

¹³ As dated by Kaufmann, C., *ibid.*

¹⁴ Caroe, W., *Archaeologia* 63, in illustrations for a 1911 paper.

CONCLUSION

The paintings in the crypt Chapel of St. Gabriel in Canterbury Cathedral were executed between 1143 and c. 1150. The technique involved was a form of fresco secco, and much damage has occurred. Nave and apse paintings are part of a single scheme, the difference in states being explained by the protection afforded the apse by a blocking wall. The scheme displayed the *Ancestors of Christ* in the nave, leading to an *Infancy of St. John the Baptist* cycle in the apse, where aspects of the *Apocalypse* filled alcove and vault.

The iconography is derived mainly from a small group of Canterbury manuscripts of the second quarter of the twelfth century, in particular from a *Psalter* leaf (New York, Pierpont Morgan Lib. 724). The iconography of the Baptist cycle is unique, as is its arrangement. The presentation of the *God* of the first chapter of the *Apocalypse* is also unique.

Two artists painted the murals; each was also responsible for one volume of the *Dover Bible* (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, Mss. 3 and 4), produced at Christ Church c. 1150. The artist of Ms. 4 can be associated with the local pictorial tradition of the second quarter of the twelfth century, while the artist of Ms. 3 acted as a conductor for a new Byzantinizing naturalism. Less relevantly, both artists are probably indicated in the illumination showing two wall-painters at work in Ms. 4 (f. 241 v.). One of these two may be the painter Alberius, who held land with his sister from Christ Church Priory from 1153-1167.

ST. ANSELM'S CHAPEL

The chapel stands in the tower to the south of the Trinity Chapel in the east end of the Cathedral, having been built by Anselm's prior Ernulf above the Chapel of St. Gabriel. It changed its name from that of the *Chapel of Saints Peter and Paul* (as recorded in a bill for work done in the chapel in 1336) when the body of St. Anselm was placed inside it before the 1174 fire, but both titles continued to be used. Measuring approximately $3\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. the painting was found some 25 ft. above the floor in March 1888, behind a wall bearing the marks of a fire. It is self-sufficient, in that a square panelled background (blue on green) forms the backdrop for the isolated figure of the saint. Paul bends forward to shake from his hand a snake which has momentarily escaped the fire in the lower right hand corner of the picture. His white under-robe is shaded in blue, with above this a robe with folds in red, and on top of all a dark robe reaching from neck to ankle along his back. White wire-like tracery can be discerned on this last. Traces of gilding remain on the halo, and the shadow around its upper rim

betrays its low relief, as occurs with the haloes in the fragmentary *Last Supper* of Dover Priory. A cloud line runs along the top of the picture, and a line of fictive carving below, with typical edging of yellow and ochre bands framing three sides of the piece. The cornice directly above was decorated with a line of acanthus, and further traces of decorative banding extend into the alcove.

ICONOGRAPHY

Taken on its own the miracle portrayed is one traditionally associated with the invulnerability of Christ's followers as seen in *Luke*, X, 19: 'Behold I have given you the right to trample on snakes and scorpions, and all the power of the enemy, and take no hurt from it'. It is the demonstration of Paul's goodness to those who thought him to be evil, and at Canterbury may express a personal ecclesiastical vindication.

There is a definite element of discretion in the placing of the picture high up in a hidden angle, and the incident that it portrays is an imaginative rather than a stock choice. The Byzantine iconography of the scene as described by Dionysius of Fourna clings closely to the source, *Acts*, XXVIII, 3-6. The few early illustrated narratives of the saint omit this scene (e.g. Paris Bib. Nat. gr. 102, Cod. Suppl. gr. 1216, the Rockefeller-McCormick Gospels, etc.) nor does it appear in the Sicilian mosaic cycles. This lack of ready examples does not, however, preclude the existence of a tradition in England, possibly carried by such models as the English champlevé enamel plaques of the life of St. Paul in the Victoria and Albert Museum. At least one extant early Christian version survives, in an ivory diptych of the fifth century in the Museo Nazionale in Florence, where it complements an image of the enthroned Apostle.

STYLE

Rather general comparisons have been made in the past between this work and figures of Cluniac origin in Sussex, in Palermo, Monreale, and Asinou. More repeatedly it has been likened to the work of the *Bury Bible*; the aspects of the mural which are said to link to the style of the manuscript illumination can be divided into two groups. The first group is made up of characteristics shared with other works of the period ('coral cloud', panelled backgrounds, white surface tracery on drapery) and need not concern us. The second and more particular group revolves around comparisons of drapery and anatomy in some detail. A typical example of the Bible style (in fully developed clinging curvilinear form) is that of f. 70, where faces retain red cheek-spots and

stylised hair and beards. In contrast the head of St. Paul shows finely graded facial tones and naturalistic beard and hair-style. Added to this, the saint's hands are life-like, particularly in the careful painting of the closed left hand, while those of the Bible have mannered fingers elongated into tiny nodules.

The contrast in drapery is not as marked, although mannerism again tends to order the illumination while the mural is more relaxed, to the point of slackness in, e.g. the sleeve of the right arm. The grounds for placing the monumental saint in a direct line from the Bury Bible are therefore not wholly convincing.

Elements of the mural can be found in a Canterbury context in e.g. the *Eadwine Psalter*, the *Dover Bible*, and in the murals of *St. Gabriel's Chapel* (variously, in the tracery on the surface of drapery and in the ridges and folds of the drapery itself; the face and hands are not matched). The *St. Paul* is, however, painted with an easier understanding of the Byzantine milieu from which it is drawn. The quality of this understanding surpasses that of the first artist of the first volume of the *Dover Bible* in its naturalism, despite the restricting aspects of its partly stylized drapery. This rendering of cloth is discarded in favour of a slightly more natural arrangement in the only Canterbury illumination to parallel the mural. A portrait of *St. Dunstan* of c. 1170, it is itself a rarity, being one of the few Christ Church miniatures to be produced in the second half of the century (London, B.L. MS Royal 10 A XIII f. 256). It is akin in treatment of face and hands. In an English context the closest parallels are the more static two folios found in the *Winchester Psalter* (London, B.L. Cotton Nero C IV ff. 29, 30). These are direct copies of Byzantine models, and coincidentally employ the double banded margin in conjunction with the coral patterning. The same preservation of the original style is made, but without the freedom of the Canterbury work.

CONCLUSION

The wall support of the *Saint Paul* is a continuation from the chapel beneath and so dates c. 1130. The iconography of the work adheres closely to a Byzantine formula, and is now unique. The style is not typical of Canterbury, its closest and isolated parallel from that area being of a late date; it is itself possibly a mid-century work. The artist was either a local and faithful interpreter of a Byzantine model; or a visitor whose style made little obvious impact.

HOSPITAL OF THOMAS THE MARTYR

This hospice was set up prior to 1180 below the Cathedral on the east bridge of the city. It was founded by Edward FitzOdbold, whose

grandfather had stood surety for Becket in 1164; Becket's nephew Ralph was to be one of the first masters of the house. Now hemmed in, the greater part of the original fabric remains of the undercroft with a refectory running above and a chantry chapel. It is on the north wall of the refectory that the painting was found in 1879. As it is now the mural (approximately 12 × 15 ft.) shows a majesty set in a Mandorla with symbols of the evangelists at either side. A band of diamond riband runs along the top. The colours are of a limited range—red, green, blue-grey, black, yellow and white. Prior to restoration traces of a contemporary *Last Supper* were visible below the *Majestas*.

ICONOGRAPHY

The theme of the *Last Supper* made an early appearance in English Romanesque wall painting and continued to be used during the twelfth century (Hardham, Battle, East Clandon, Dover Priory, etc.). It is unfortunate that we can no longer examine the tradition of the Eastbridge version, but the subject is a fitting one for the site. The *Majestas* is more unexpected, since there is no record of the subject in a similar setting, nor indeed is there an English example to be found elsewhere at this late date. It is something of a lavish gesture (perhaps coincident with the sudden upturn in fortune of the hospice in 1203, when Archbishop Waller took it under his wing) that would have dominated the lower painting. The artist was given a unique opportunity to execute a subject by then limited to the field of manuscript illumination. The result has been a mixed interpretation; the covered left hand of St. Matthew is in rather self-conscious retrospection, while the orb of God's left hand, used in preference to the more usual book or open palm, has a limited English ancestry (in Hereford Cath. Lib. 0.5. XI, f. 147, and London B.L. Landesdowne 383 f. 12v.). Otherwise the arrangement differs little from other early thirteenth-century versions.

STYLE

The long thin hair thinly framing the face, and the face itself, are akin to those of an early thirteenth-century *St. John* at Godalming. The striation of the hair is carried out in much the same way as that in the later Winchester murals. The features look forward to the slightly inane frontal gaze of the school of Matthew Paris, while the figure of St. Matthew has a charm and individuality which belong to the new order (probably the more easily produced by virtue of its smaller scale). The riband below the wall plate and the multiplicity of banding in the

ROMANESQUE WALL PAINTINGS

mandorla show a retention of early forms. The throne is of the tall, pierced and backless type found in the *Lothian Bible* (New York, Pierpont Morgan Lib. MS 791, f. 4v.) in a line of development somewhere between the stubbier but similar version in e.g. a *Glossed Gospels* of Trinity College Cambridge (MS B 5 3 f. 4v.) and the more elaborate example of the *Chichester Roundel*. The technique involves a heavy use of tempera, with little penetration of colour into the shallow plaster (the lines of the stonework are clearly visible). The total effect is of a rather skinned surface. As the representative of the last phase of Canterbury wall-painting it is leached of colour contrasts, and lacks the interplay of patterns, and above all the mystical dignity of e.g. the figure of God in the vault of St. Gabriel's Chapel.

CONCLUSION

The extant mural is an accomplished if bland work of c. 1200, possibly reflecting something of a late Canterbury manuscript illumination style (compare e.g. London, B.L. Cotton Claudius B II f. 341). The technique may be indicative of the failure of the fresco secco tradition of the earlier murals, and as a whole the work creates a strong impression of being dependent upon a miniature model.

