

NOTES ON SOME NORMAN DETAILS IN ROMSEY ABBEY.

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That the architectural style called Norman, or Anglo-Norman, is a variety of the Romanesque, and that, being Romanesque, it is derived from the Classic, through the Roman styles of architecture, is generally acknowledged; and it is therefore implied that the general plan of the buildings and their constructive forms were derived from the styles or fashions prevalent in Rome or Italy, rather than that they were new creations or inventions of the Northmen themselves. This is undoubtedly true, and can be readily demonstrated in regard to the two points mentioned—the plan of the buildings, and their constructive forms. With regard to the decoration the same cannot be maintained as a general principle. It is true that one of the most usual forms of ornamentation for the capital of a column is a modification of the *volute*, which, whether a “reminiscence of the Roman Corinthian order,” according to Fergusson, or, as more generally supposed, a survival of the Ionic, is clearly of classic origin. With this exception, the ornamentation in the Norman style is generally characteristic, *sui generis*, and unlike anything but itself.

The situations in which the artists of this period preferred to show their powers of sculpture were chiefly,—mouldings of arches, doors and windows, capitals of columns, and, to a less extent, wall decoration. In either of these situations the decoration might be one of two kinds, or both combined.

There might be *patterns* of great variety and richness, or *figure-sculpture* of much higher development artistically, though perhaps relatively inferior in execution. The latter kind of decoration, figure sculpture, may be called archaic, but shows great wealth of imagination in the designers. The former kind, pattern sculpture, is of great but not infinite variety; and certain forms recur with very great frequency, so that, as a rule, Norman ornamental mouldings, such as the chevron, or zigzag, the billet, &c., are some of the most easily recognisable of architectural features.

There is one group of mouldings, not, as far as I know, of frequent occurrence, which does show with great distinctness a classical origin. Of this there are two instances in Romsey Abbey church.

1.—On each side of the choir arch, at the level of the triforium, is a semi-cylindrical shaft resting on a corbel, carved with a leaf pattern of evident classical origin.

FIG 1



This same pattern occurs as a moulding over the south doorway leading into the (former) cloister, as may be seen from the accompanying illustration. The leaf is not an Acanthus leaf; it is not like an Acanthus, but perhaps more resembles an exceedingly conventionalised and simplified—one might almost say degraded—form of that ornament than anything else. The leaf of *Acanthus mollis* is said to have given the idea of the Corinthian capital to Callimachus; but between the graceful and flowing curves of the leaf on the capital of a Greek column and the stiff and crude forms to be seen in some late Norman capitals, especially in the early French style, forms which were precursors of the stiff foliage of our early English capitals, there is a wide interval. There is also a great difference between the elaborate foliage forms,

applied as ornamentation to a flat surface in Greek and Roman examples, and the very rude and simple instance here found at Romsey, but between one extreme and the other numerous transitional forms can be observed, showing clearly the connection, and indicating, I think distinctly, that this particular moulding is of classic origin.

Mr. Parker states that "in the later Norman mouldings a mixture of Byzantine character is seen on the ornaments," and gives as an illustration the figure of an abacus and string at Durham,¹ which has a considerable resemblance to the Romsey moulding. The Byzantine character, as distinguished from the classical, is not however evident; and there does not seem any need to suppose that in every case the classical forms met with in Norman ornament had come through a Byzantine channel. To do this would imply either that the Normans themselves were unacquainted with Greece and Italy, or that they did not, or could not, attempt to reproduce what they had seen.

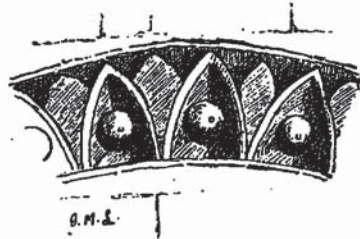
Though the simplest explanation of the presence of this ornament here seems to be that it is a rough reproduction or imitation from a classical model, it is a rather curious fact that a remarkably similar pattern occurs in the Mosque of Ibn Tulûn, at Cairo,² erected 879. This, I believe, is not a usual or characteristic Arabian design. The mosque was built by a Christian in the Byzantine Arabian manner, and this shows the influence of classic forms in the east as well as in the west, travelling in this instance, no doubt, through a Byzantine channel. Taken in connection however with the peculiar capitals at Romsey referred to below (Figs. iii and iv) it is noteworthy.

2.—Another instance of a classical moulding is to be seen over the easternmost pier arch on the south side of the nave. This is enriched with three mouldings; internally, a treble zigzag; externally, the hatched, or trowel head; and between the two, an ornament resembling the *echinus*, egg and anchor, egg and tongue, or egg and dart, which is especially found in the Ionic order.

¹ Introduction to Gothic Architecture, p. 76.

² Figured in Owen Jones's Grammar of Ornament, plate xxxi, 3.

FIG II



In the Romsey example (Fig. ii) the moulding is rude, the "egg" part of the ornament is not oval but globular, and the "dart" is very rudimentary; but the resemblance to the classical original is obvious, though the arrangement is reversed. This, though occurring in Byzantine work, is not, I believe, frequently met with in, and certainly is not characteristic of, that style.

3.—In the south choir aisle is a pillar adjoining the centre of the choir, with a capital carved with acanthus (or *quasi-acanthus*) leaves, closely resembling the Corinthian capital, but of course in a rude way. This form is not common in Anglo-Norman architecture, though the most usual form of capital in the Early French style, and of not infrequent occurrence in Norman (eleventh and twelfth century) churches in Normandy.

4.—In the same south aisle of the choir is another pillar against the south wall, having a capital in the form of an Ionic volute. This is a very common form of Norman capital, generally speaking of early date (earlier than the building of Romsey Abbey). It occurs only this once at Romsey, whilst at Christchurch it is the prevailing form of capital throughout all the Norman work.

Of these four instances of *quasi*-classical ornamentation, the last is the commonest, but not the least interesting.

We have here a form of decorative construction which can be traced back through Roman and Greek times to the early ages of the Persian empire, where it is supposed to have originated. The acanthus capital as found in Gothic architecture may have been a development and amplification of this volute, or it may have arisen independently as a

reminiscence of the Corinthian. Many forms are to be found intermediate between a simple volute and an ordinary acanthus, showing that the idea of foliage, at any rate in many cases, arose out of the volute. Parker is of this opinion in regard to the "stiff-leaf foliage" of the early English style, and Sir G. Scott traces the course of its development from Byzantium through the south of France. At the same time it must be admitted that there is a very great resemblance between the acanthus capitals of the Early French style and the typical Corinthian capital: the Romanesque origin of the former is undoubted, and the more or less rude specimens seen in Normandy, and less frequently in this country, would seem more naturally to be a degraded imitation of Roman Corinthian, rather than a development of Roman or Byzantine Ionic.

These two capitals, the volute and the acanthus, occur sufficiently often in Romanesque work to be more or less characteristic, the volute being much the earlier of the two as regards its general use. But the other ornaments above alluded to are not of common occurrence; neither can the path by which they travelled from Athens or Corinth to Romsey be clearly traced.

5.—There is another example of ornamentation at Romsey of quite a different kind, and certainly not of common occurrence in Anglo-Norman architecture.¹ In the ambulatory, or eastern aisle beyond the altar, leading from the north to the south choir aisle, are four shafts possessing capitals that distinctly recall a form of decoration used with great frequency by the Arabian mosque builders throughout the palmy period of Saracenic architecture. This is called "stalactite" work; it is not easy to describe, but the terms "honeycomb" work, or "miniature arcading" give some idea of its appearance. It is used chiefly in the "pendentives," or somewhat fan-shaped structures by which the quadrangular area of the mosque is blended with the super-imposed dome; stalactite work occurs also, but less frequently, in the position of the capital of a pier, as in the tomb mosque of Kait Bey, near Cairo.

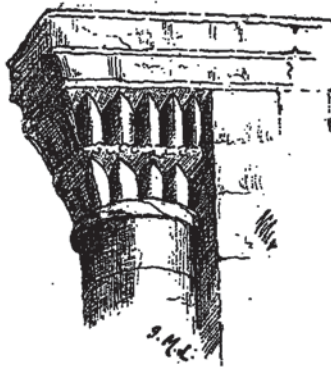
¹ I am not aware of its occurrence in any other place.

The accompanying figures (iii and iv) show two of the

FIG III



FIG IV



capitals in the ambulatory at Romsey, which are seen to differ slightly from each other, but give a very good imitation on a small scale of Arabian stalactite work. Similar capitals occur in the small columns ornamenting the exterior of the windows on the south side of the choir. The designer of these capitals without doubt took the idea from Arabian ornament he had seen in the East; it is not a Byzantine form, and there seems no need to invoke the aid of a Byzantine artist. It is not from any beauty of design or excellence of workmanship that these capitals are of interest, but because they indicate, I think clearly, and in an instance of by no means frequent occurrence, the influence of Eastern upon Western art. There has been much controversy about the origin of the pointed arch; the most rational explanation seems to be that it was copied by Gothic or Romanesque architects from the Saracens. No pointed arches are known in the west of earlier date than the first crusade (1100). They were used largely by the Saracens for two centuries before this; and though the Christians may have copied a Saracenic feature, it is certain that Mahomedans never copied anything Christian (Hayter Lewis).¹ I should suppose that these stalactite capitals at Romsey are an instance of the same influence. The first crusade was in 1099; the second, 1144; the third, 1187-1192. Romsey is variously dated as 1130, 1160,

¹ Encyclopædia Britannica; Art. "Architecture."

1180, and we may imagine that some knight or priest, returning from one or other crusade, brought this idea with him. The instances of classical ornament mentioned above may very possibly be due to the same source, without the intervention of any Byzantine designer or workman. The technical skill of the Byzantines caused them (Prof. Middleton¹) "to dominate the art of the Christian world" up to the twelfth century: but in the instances to which attention has been drawn, the decoration seems to have been derived either from a classical or a Saracenic source.

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Since writing the above, I have seen a pamphlet by Mr. J. Park Harrison, on "The Pre-Norman date of the Design and some of the stonework of Oxford Cathedral" (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1891), in which attention is drawn to the Oriental character of some of the ornaments at the Abbey Church of Bernay, in Normandy, dating probably from the early part of the eleventh century. This ornamentation is curious and unlike Norman work, but I did not find anything resembling the "stalactite" pattern above mentioned. Mr. Harrison shows that there was considerable intercourse between the East and Normandy at as early a date as even the beginning of the eleventh century, and considers that much of the Eastern and Byzantine ornament met with in English churches may be of early, rather than necessarily of late, Norman date. In the case of Romsey, however, the middle of the twelfth century seems to be the date to which the present building, as regards its Norman parts, should be referred. At Winchfield the small chancel arch, much ornamented, is Moorish or Saracenic in character; and a capital in the south doorway has a lotus leaf. This ornament is also said to occur at St. Cross. It would be a matter of interest to collect the various examples of Oriental influence on Norman architecture which doubtless exist in this county, and, if possible, trace the paths that this influence has followed.

For the sketches from which the accompanying illustrations have been produced, I am indebted to Miss Longmore. They are faithfully rendered from the originals and serve to make the descriptions more intelligible.

¹ *Ibid.* Art. "Sculpture."