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M. D. Anderson  
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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

WE are often accused of being an inartistic people, and if this implies a lack of interest in our artists, it is certainly true. We know little of Shakespeare's life, character or opinions, though he created a new world, and as for that host of artists to whom we owe the magnificent picture-gallery of medieval life and thought contained in our cathedrals and parish churches, at best we know little more of them than their mere names. We are beginning to regret our carelessness. Scholars explore the by-ways of Elizabethan history and literature in the hopes that, against the background which they recreate, we may catch some shadow of Shakespeare's lost identity, and though they can only show us the faintest outline of the man, we are better able to conceive the scope of his genius when we have analysed the commonplace subjects on which he worked his spells. It is from this angle that I wish to suggest an approach to Gothic sculpture.

We are most of us brought up to venerate Shakespeare and admire cathedrals, but while the dramatist's sources of inspiration are for the most part well known to us, those of the Gothic carvers are often not only obscure in origin but interpreted in a sort of pictorial shorthand which baffles the observer. A great deal of the figure sculpture of the Middle Ages

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had a symbolical meaning which was easily recognised by contemporaries, but an equally large proportion was probably purely decorative, and so is incapable of explanation. That strange monster, half-monarch and half-bird, may have some faint relation to the legend of Alexander carried up into the sky by harnessed eagles, or it may be pure fantasy. But even the designs of purest fantasy, those griffins that confront each other on each side of a chalice, how many questions they suggest! In what Assyrian or Chaldean brain did that design first take shape? How many generations of tireless Eastern craftsmen copied it, while the sculptors of Greece and Rome borrowed it, and the secret meaning of that monstrously guarded chalice (if it ever had a meaning) was lost? On what rich Oriental textile did it cross Europe, either as the gift of an embassy or the trophy of some adventurous traveller, trading with the East?

Our questions can never be answered and so are endless. Every church is full of problems, and to some there seems no answer, while others offer a bewildering choice of answers all equally plausible.

In this endless variety of problem and solution lies the fascination of Gothic iconography. It is a dangerous pursuit for those who seek after certainties, and full of pitfalls for the scholarly. The writers of the late nineteenth century explained the symbolism of every grotesque, a feat of which St Bernard of Clairvaux would not have been capable, since he wrote to William, Abbot of St Thierry, in 1125: "What business

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have those ridiculous monstrosities, those creatures of wonderfully deformed beauty, and beautiful deformity, before the eyes of studious friars in the courts of cloisters? What mean those filthy apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half-men, those spotted tigers, those fighting soldiers and horn-blowing hunters? Thou seest many bodies under one head and again many heads on one body. . . . In short there is seen everywhere such marvellous diversity of forms that one reads with more pleasure what is carved in stones than what is written in books”.

Modern scholarship does not tend towards such all-embracing explanations, and in this book I have tried only to suggest some of the best authenticated sources from which the subjects of carvings were drawn. If my interpretations fail to satisfy my readers, my defence must be made in the words which Vincent de Beauvais (c. 1190–1260) wrote in the Prologue to his *Speculum Majus*, that encyclopaedia of strange learning, from which the carvers of the French cathedrals drew so much of their inspiration. “Seeing however that in these and such-like matters either part of the contradictories may be believed, or disbelieved, without peril to our Faith; therefore I admonish the reader that he abhor not this book if perchance he find such contradictions in many places, and under the names of divers authors; the more so as I have herein undertaken not the task of a composer, but that of a compiler.”

This book is not written for scholars nor for those who wish to do the maximum amount of sight-seeing in

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the minimum of time ; it is for the leisurely unlearned with a certain ingenuity of mind, who may be prepared to accept this slight study as an introduction to one of the most fascinating of pursuits, and, in the excitement of making their own researches and discoveries, forgive the frequent inadequacy of mine.

## Chapter II

### THE MASONS

IT is as difficult to form an impression of the medieval mason's life as to study the shapes of trees while struggling through thick undergrowth. Facts are plentiful, for the fabric-rolls of cathedrals, the royal records and the archives of schools and colleges offer an abundance of disconnected data; but though we can find out the names of the workmen employed, their wages and the length of their service, we can hardly ever trace the rise of one man through the successive grades of his profession. Only the forest giants tower above the scrub and are plainly visible from our present distance, and even so we only see the summit of their achievement, while their origins are lost in the tangle that hides their less distinguished fellows. For instance, we know that Walter of Hereford was master-mason at Vale Royal during the three years it took to build, from 1277 to 1280, and afterwards at Caernarvon until 1315; and we know that he travelled about England and Scotland in the King's service, being paid 14*s.* a week, but we do not know how he came to be a master-mason, nor indeed any facts about his upbringing or education. Since he is alluded to as a "cementarius", he was probably a working mason at some stage of his career, and it is likely that he served under some master-mason whom he succeeded as Henry de

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Elerton served and succeeded him. But all this is mere guess-work, and if we begin at the other end of the scale and try to trace the rise of some man whose name figures on the pay-rolls of the great buildings, there is even less evidence to guide us. During the twelfth century instances of capitals bearing a sculptor's signature occur occasionally as at Romsey Abbey, and the font at Bridekirk, Cumberland, is inscribed:

RIKARTH HE ME IWROKTE.

But a mere name, unsupported by any other record, is of little assistance, and even such signatures as this cease to occur during the thirteenth century when Gothic sculpture was in its prime.

In the face of this difficulty I shall try to describe, as briefly as possible, the classes of workmen employed, and their working conditions, leaving it to the industry or imagination of my readers to reconstruct the progress of individual lives.

The medieval records mention many varieties of mason, "cementarii, lathomi, positores" etc., but there is not enough evidence to settle whether these words do, in fact, represent different grades, or are merely due to the different vocabularies of the chroniclers.

Three groups can, however, be recognised:

- (i) The rough-masons who laid stones and hewed them with axe and hammer.
- (ii) The free-masons, who worked with axe, chisel and mallet on the free-stone mouldings for doors

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and windows, and carved capitals or door-jambs. A skilled free-mason could prepare templets, or moulds, for elaborate windows, and set them up when the slightest error in one section would ruin the whole design.

- (iii) The workers in hard stone, alabaster or marble who made effigies and other elaborate sculptures for tombs, sometimes working for a special order, at others making stock figures which could be adapted to any future need.

Over these was the master-mason, and though his duties are not precisely defined, he was evidently expected to produce plans and models for any work his employer might have in view, even though (as sometimes happened with the royal masons) others were to execute them. He would travel about the country inspecting woods and quarries so as to insure the supplies of suitable materials, and would oversee every stage of construction, reporting all faulty work, engaging and dismissing workmen, as well as assessing and distributing their pay.

In addition to what we may call his public duties it was a very common occurrence for a master-mason to run a quarry, or act as a building contractor on his own; as for instance, when Henry de Elerton undertook to rebuild the quay at Caernarvon while acting as master-mason to the castle. This practice enabled the masons to become men of considerable substance, while it had the additional merit of fitting them to execute

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important undertakings by the experience they gained in their private ventures. At Westminster the chief master-mason, carpenter and painter were attached to the Court as permanent officials, and the office of Royal Mason survived as a sinecure until comparatively recent times, being held by the architect William Kent in the reign of George II. When much building was in progress the royal master-mason of the thirteenth century was in almost daily contact with the King, and there are records of interchanges of barrels of wine between Henry III and his master-mason, John of Gloucester.

Associated with the master-mason in any very large building was a clerk, or keeper, of the works, who was chiefly concerned with the financial arrangements, and was more likely to be a monk than a mason; in smaller undertakings the master-mason combined both offices. In the case of a monastery or cathedral the sacrist often undertook the task of clerk of the works, unless the amount of building in progress was so great as to need the services of a special official.

In the King's service the keepers of the works were often men of great ability, who rose to positions of distinction. Their duties were varied and at different times they might pay a garrison, inquire into a stoppage of navigation on a river, take charge of several castles at once or act as Sheriff of a county.<sup>1</sup> In 1389 Geoffrey Chaucer was clerk of the works to Westminster Palace, the Tower, Berkhamstead, and several manors and houses, being paid 2s. a day.

<sup>1</sup> Knoop and Jones, *The Medieval Mason*, p. 20.



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The most distinguished of these royal overseers was William of Wykeham (1324–1404), who entered the service of Edward III as Superintendent of Buildings in 1347, and, though not yet in orders, was made rector of Irstead, in Norfolk, in 1349. He rose high in the King's favour, and was made Bishop of Winchester in 1361. His influence contributed largely to the rapid spread of the Perpendicular style across England, from its starting-point at Gloucester, and thus he saved our Decorated style from degenerating into the mad elaboration which was later to characterise the French Flamboyant period.

Apart from the fabric-rolls and other records I have mentioned, the main sources of information about the early masons are contained in two manuscripts in the British Museum, the "Constitutiones Artis Gemetrieae Secundum Euclidem", dating from 1390, and the "History and Articles of Masonry", which dates, in its present form, from 1430, but is considered to be a copy of a version earlier than the "Constitutiones". These Constitutions of Masonry, or "Old Charges", are based on the established customs of the masons' lodges or working sheds (see page 12), at the end of the fourteenth century, and probably represent customs of an earlier date modified by later usages.

It is laid down in these Charges that masons must be of free birth, and indeed the wanderings in which their profession involved them made this essential, though cases are recorded in which the abbot of a monastery could transfer the services of a skilled mason to a

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brother-abbot, together with the land which the man inhabited.

When a great building was in course of erection large numbers of men were drafted to it from different parts of the country; 400 masons were employed on Beaumaris Castle in 1290, in addition to 30 smiths and carpenters, 1000 unskilled labourers, and 200 carters.<sup>1</sup> These numbers admittedly refer to a time of exceptional pressure, but the large buildings that were being erected throughout the kingdom created a demand for skilled labour which could never have been entirely supplied locally. The shortage of skilled masons led to various systems of impressment being adopted to furnish workmen for the royal enterprises. The usual method, in the thirteenth century, was to command the Sheriff of a county to provide so many masons, but as he was found to be more concerned with numbers than skill, this proceeding was dropped, and in the fourteenth century the master-mason, or the keeper of the works, was given power to impress skilled masons wherever he could find them. The working conditions in the lodges were unhealthy, and masons short-lived, so it is said that in 1359 William of Wykeham had impressed every good craftsman in England for the King's service, and in 1362, after the Black Death (1348-9) had decimated the workmen, proclamations were made in London and twenty-four counties, forbidding private employers to engage hewers or layers of stone without the King's leave. Only cathedrals and colleges

<sup>1</sup> Knop and Jones, *The Medieval Mason*, p. 3.