ENGLISH GOTHIC FOLIAGE SCULPTURE

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

ENGLISH GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE has been rightly described as a great national living art. Gothic architecture existed as a living art over a great part of western Europe for nearly five hundred years. In each country where it flourished it developed national characteristics. In no feature was this more conspicuous than in foliage sculpture.

When we describe an art as national, we do not mean that its germs sprang into existence within the country, but that, once sown or planted, they took root there and grew up under the influences of national surroundings. By a living art we mean an art that is not mere copying, but one that manifests a natural growth and development of innate force. This does not exclude a power of assimilation of foreign elements. Just as a tree may produce a variation of fruit or flower by being grafted with a foreign shoot, so a national art may absorb and be influenced by foreign ideas. But so long as it possesses a self-contained force springing from its roots it remains a

national living art. Such was Gothic architecture in England from 1050 to 1550, if we include Romanesque origins and Tudor survivals.

If we go back further still than 1050 we find certain forms of carved foliage in use, but they are mostly more suggestive of the cast-off leaves of autumn than of spring buds. Most of them appear to be reminiscences or distant copies of forms to be found in decadent Byzantine or Roman sculpture. But, just as in nature the buds that will not come to maturity till the spring are found pushing off the autumn dry leaves, if we search we shall find among these rude and debased forms the embryo of a form destined to become the basis of that beautiful type of carving which is called Stiff-leaf, and which afterwards became the most perfect expression of our exclusively English Gothic foliage sculpture.

The Anglo-Saxon period was not one of steady progress. There were bright spots—times when and places where saintliness and learning shone for brief intervals, and there were schools of art where great excellence was attained in the illumination of manuscripts. There were also schools where considerable artistic skill and refinement were shown in sculptured reliefs. But the general impression

produced by a study of Saxon remains is that from time to time masons were introduced from the continent, who executed fairly good work, the influence of which faded away in the course of a generation or two. The constant incursions of the Danes were not favourable to any steady progress in art, and in the deteriorating copies of the work of foreign masons we cannot expect to see many signs of life.

At the same time we must remember that very beautiful art existed in Ireland under similar conditions. It may be that there is hardly anything left of numerous works of art produced in Saxon England. Many must have been destroyed by the Danes, and it is said that the Conqueror sent many away to France and to the Pope[1]. Of these some may be still in existence, but it is difficult to differentiate them from similar work produced elsewhere.

The Normans before and at the time of the Conquest, though they were great builders, and were inspired by a fresh impulse through the adoption of free-arch construction, were very poor sculptors. They had cast aside the dregs of Classical entablatures and placed their arches directly upon their piers or

[1] Freeman's *Norman Conquest of England*.

columns, but they seldom attempted any sculptured ornament. When they did so, it was either a distant copy of Classical or, especially when human figures were intended, a rude and barbarous effort. Later on, as they became more skilled, two rival influences become apparent—the French, following Roman or Byzantine models, and the English, which was also reminiscent of Classical traditions but mixed with Norse and manuscript, and sometimes metal-work and wicker-work suggestions. The Classical traditions often seem more associated with Byzantine than Roman sources. It was from the English and not the French elements that our characteristic English Gothic foliage arose. The most constant feature of Anglo-Saxon sculpture was intertwining strands terminating in conventional half-opened leaves (Pls. 2 and 25) or trefoiled buds. From the trefoil was developed the Early English stiff-leaf foliage which soon ousted the French Corinthian, and for a hundred years maintained the style which may be regarded as our national style of Gothic foliage.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century the various permutations and combinations of the stiff-leaf convention had been exhausted, and for some ten or twenty years a pure

naturalism prevailed, but it then gave way to a fresh convention, called the Decorated, in which the naturalism was modified by a peculiar kind of waving and rippling which is easily recognised. This style continued in the west until the end of the Gothic period; elsewhere foliage sculpture in stone came almost to an end before the Perpendicular period, the straight lines and panelling of that style not lending themselves to floral decoration. On monuments and other rich work we sometimes find bands of vine-leaf or other foliage, generally coarse and square-cut. At the very end of the Gothic period there was some attempt to return to naturalism, but this was nipped in the bud by the invasion of Renaissance art (Pl. 85).

It is remarkable that, seeing how close was the connexion between England and France in the days of our Plantagenet kings, just when Gothic art on both sides of the Channel was in the full vigour of its youthful exuberance, the development was so different. In no features was this difference more marked than in the treatment of foliage sculpture as well as of mouldings. In northern France there is very little in the way of intermediate convention between the Romanesque Corinthian type of foliage, and a naturalistic representation

of leaves and flowers. In fact they were intermingled. There is no parallel at all to our English stiff-leaf, which is one of the chief glories of our national architecture, except, possibly, in a few instances in Normandy under English influence.

CHAPTER II: PRIMITIVES

APART from some possible Roman fragments the earliest specimens of foliage sculpture worked in this country are to be found on the Anglian crosses. The dates of these crosses have been a subject of much controversy, but a consensus of latest authorities accepts them as genuine work of the seventh and eighth centuries[1]. On these the foliage sculpture, if it can be so called, consists entirely of twining sprays and occasional vine leaves and grapes. The earliest and best of these would appear to be the work of foreign masons. St Augustine is said to have brought with him some artisans from Italy, and St Wilfred (634–709) is known to have done so, and some of these crosses may well have been their work. The standing crosses are not numerous, but there are hundreds of fragments scattered about, mostly in Yorkshire. The character of this carving does not differ from specimens which are to be found all over the eastern portion of the Roman Empire—in Italy, Greece, Egypt and

[1] This question is argued at considerable length in Prior and Gardner's *English Medieval Figure Sculpture*, Book II, Chapter I, and by Professors Baldwin Brown and Lethaby and Sir Martin Conway in various numbers of *The Burlington Magazine*.

Asia Minor. It is Byzantine or Coptic in origin. Although probably executed in England, and copied by native masons, it is rather cosmopolitan than national art. Some of the original specimens here compare favourably with sculpture of the same period in Italy and elsewhere. But there is little in this carving to indicate any life or originality. It is decadent Byzantine of the kind often called Lombardic because it was the kind of work that was produced in Italy after the Lombard invasion. The chief features of this style, besides the Byzantesque figures, are intricate knots of intertwined strands, and wavy sprays sometimes with biting beasts or pecking birds inserted among them. The figures when copied tended to become grotesque barbarisms. The knots were successfully copied up to the twelfth century. The strands, which tended to become grooved, survived in the intertwined or woven sprays of what is commonly called Anglo-Saxon sculpture and we find animals inserted in such twelfth-century work as that of Rochester west doorway, Ely Prior's Doorway, and Kilpeck. The occasional vine-leaf and grapes did not lead to any further development, but a common form in this early work was a half-opened leaf in profile. This occurs frequently wherever this style of carving

exists, and it survived into the twelfth century.

Assuming that these Anglian crosses belong to the end of the seventh century, we cannot trace any progressive development through the eighth ninth and tenth centuries. It was not a period of progress, but rather of decadence and destruction, in spite of bright spots here and there. Arts which could be carried on in the seclusion of monasteries or convents, such as illuminated manuscripts and fine needlework, were carried to great perfection in certain quarters, perhaps also ivory-carving, some good specimens of which are attributed to Anglo-Saxon sources (Pl. 3). It is, however, questionable to what extent stone-carving was influenced by these arts; whether, for instance, the wonderful spirals and convolutions of Irish manuscripts should be regarded as predecessors or followers of stone-carvings; but goldsmiths' work, wicker-work, and iron and wood-work certainly suggested some of the designs. In referring to a cross-shaft of very rude work at Bishop Auckland, Sir Martin Conway says: "We find here, continuing, the traditions introduced by Italian craftsmen into the North of England at or about the time of Wilfred. Those traditions, the forms developed by Irish and English

craftsmen in goldsmiths' work, illumination and perhaps also in wood-carving, and, finally, the influence of surviving works of Roman sculpture and decoration—these were the three factors by whose union the art of the Anglian sculptures was produced and is sufficiently explained[1]."

Between the period of the Anglian crosses and the eleventh century—a period of constant warfare and Danish incursions—we know little of any arts except the illuminations and needlework already mentioned, but towards the end of that period, the time shortly before or after the Norman Conquest, amid the dry bones of dead Byzantesque art we may discover some symptoms of a new living force. The grooved triple strands of Anglian art terminate naturally in a sort of trefoil. The trefoil is a bud-form ready to open further and to multiply its parts. It is therefore suitable as a basis for the decoration of curved or flat surfaces and to fill spaces of any shape. Apart from its obvious symbolism the trefoil had inevitably found its way into art in all ages. The thunderbolt of Zeus, the French lilies and the Prince of Wales' feathers are all varieties of it. Once recognised as having these

[1] *The Burlington Magazine*, "A Dangerous Archaeological Method."