

The Stone of the Coronation of the Virgin



Photo: Chris Widdows

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECES OF MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE IN ENGLAND

It is no exaggeration to say that this is one of the most important pieces of medieval sculpture in England.

Along with some of the other stones now in the Museum, it was discovered in 1949 at Barn Acre Cottage near Borough Marsh Farm, on the opposite bank of the Thames to Shiplake, by the eminent art historian, George Zarnecki.

In the 1990s Bernard Worssam confirmed that it is carved from Caen stone, whereas many of the capitals in the Museum's collection, which may have originated from Reading Abbey, are made of the cheaper Taynton stone.

Most of the Museum's stones that were not unearthed by Zarnecki in 1949 came from Holme Park, Sonning and from Borough Marsh, Shiplake. They were discovered by Charles Keyser just before the 1914 -18 war. Keyser was told at the time that his original finds at Holme Park had been brought from Borough Marsh. Consequently he made further excavations in this area and uncovered more stones. This was not quite the same location as Zarnecki's find, nevertheless it is generally assumed that there is a connection between the two groupings.

Although some have very high quality carvings, they do not feature explicit representations of important religious dogma such as that portrayed by the Coronation stone.

THE STONE'S ICONOGRAPHY



The Quenington carving
over the south door

The stone depicts 'Mary, Mother of God', enthroned with her son, Jesus Christ, who is placing the crown on her head. The apparent simplicity of the image belies a much more complicated theological and artistic provenance.

The stone is one of the earliest known pieces of sculpture depicting this theme in England. It can most probably be dated to the mid 12th century.

Another sculpture, dealing with the same subject, may be found at St Swithin's church, Quenington, in Gloucestershire. Their website claims that the carving over the south door of the church is the oldest sculpture of this topic in Europe. This would make the Reading stone, which dates to the same period, one of international significance.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE ICONOGRAPHY

Though rare in sculpture, the iconography depicts a recurring and developing theme in the Christian church from at least the 6th century. The place of Mary in the Christian story of 'salvation history' has been debated down the centuries and art has always been used to convey current thinking and teaching.

The belief in the role of the Virgin as the Mother of God, (*the one who gives birth to God* - the 'theotokos' or 'deipara') appears in some of the earliest Christian writings and associated art works. One very early depiction, dating to the 6th century, is in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome.

The tradition that when Mary died her soul, followed by her body, was taken to heaven, can also be found in early 6th to 8th century texts, such as the account of St John the Theologian.

The debate centred on two issues: firstly, whether Mary died, and secondly, if so, whether her body was also taken to heaven.

An alternative, but minority, narrative was that she did not die but was taken straight to heaven.



Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome.
6th century

DEVOTION TO THE VIRGIN IN THE 10TH AND 11TH CENTURIES

It is generally believed that the stone came from Reading Abbey. Its likely date, the subject matter and that it is made of such prestigious material, all point to it coming from a very high status building. Reading Abbey is therefore an obvious choice.

Whether this is the case, or not, there was an existing devotion to the Virgin throughout Europe, let alone England. This had been reinforced by various Papal decrees. The authority of Rome had long been recognised by the Saxon church as can be seen from Bede's history and from Papal directives and Church Councils such as those at Clovesho in the 8th century.

By the 10th to 11th centuries the dogma that Mary had been taken to heaven, whether merely spiritually or also corporeally, was deeply embedded in Catholic teaching in the west. In the eastern Orthodox church there existed the tradition of the 'Dormition', or falling asleep, and that Mary's body was taken to heaven later.

The growth of Norman influence under Edward the Confessor, and even more so after 1066, strengthened not just the political relationship between Normandy and England but also affected the practice and rituals of Christianity. The design of the churches and their art reflected these changes.

THE STONE'S PLACE IN 12TH CENTURY RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND BELIEF

The Coronation stone was most probably carved in the early 12th century at the time when Henry I founded Reading Abbey. We know that Henry had close connections with the Benedictine monks at Cluny, in Burgundy. Indeed he was one of their major benefactors and Cluniac Benedictine monks were the founders of Reading Abbey. The stylistic evidence from its architectural remains would indicate that he engaged Norman craftsmen; though it is possible that local Saxon masons were also employed.

It was expensive to ferry Caen stone across the channel. This contrasted with the cheaper and more easily transportable stone from the Taynton quarry, near Oxford. Much of this was used in building Reading Abbey. However the use of Caen stone shows the prestige of the carving. Moreover the fact it was used for this image in particular reinforces its importance in the minds of those who made it and looked upon it.



Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome.
mid 12th c. mosaic
of the crowned Virgin.

At the time the Abbey was being built a teaching closely associated with that of the Coronation of the Virgin, that of the 'Immaculate Conception', was being hotly debated across Christendom—not least in England. The dogma of the 'Immaculate Conception' is often misunderstood outside the Catholic world. This states that Mary was conceived naturally, with a human mother and father in the usual way, but without the inherited guilt associated with the first (original) sin of Adam and Eve. As such Mary was not subject to the penalties of this sin, one of which was considered by some to be death and decomposition of the body. Hence the belief grew that Mary either did not die or, if she did, then her incorrupt body was taken to heaven where she was crowned by her son. It is notable that Hugh, the first Abbot of Reading and a Cluniac Benedictine, observed, annually, the feast of the Immaculate Conception at Henry's request.

THE CORONATION STONE AS A TREASURE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

So here in Reading we are fortunate to have such a rare sculptured depiction of this important religious theme, possibly only one of two in England dating to this period. If we recall that Reading Abbey was dedicated to 'the mother and ever Virgin Mary', it is easy to see why such an image should be associated with the monastery.

WHY I CHOSE THIS PIECE

Whether originally from the Abbey or not, and even if we leave aside the religious element, when we look upon this stone we are viewing a most beautiful work of stone sculpture which holds a special place in the history of art in England.

For these two reasons , one religious, the other artistic, I chose this remarkable exhibit when asked to write about one of my favourite objects in our museum,

John Mullaney