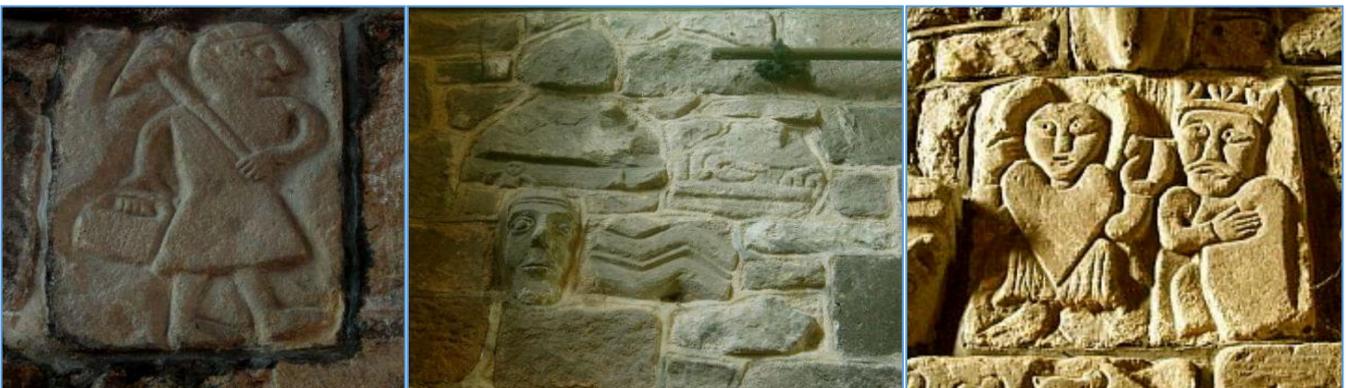




A corpus of Northumbrian, Mercian and other early stone sculpture in St Mary's Church, Wirksworth and some subsidiary observations.

Wirksworth Archaeological Society  
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## Introduction

This corpus contains pictures of almost all the stone sculptural carvings known to be in St Mary's church, it is a photographic note not a research document, although where details are available we have tried to include them.

### The Wirksworth Stone

Leonard (1993), dealing with the architecture of Derbyshire churches, is unequivocal about the Wirksworth Stone. He describes it as "the greatest treasure in any Derbyshire church".

A view of the Wirksworth Stone, which is a sarcophagus tomb lid.



The summary of the iconography given below is that provided by Hawkes (1994). A further assessment can be found in Rollason (1996). The carved stone was found "two feet" below the surface, with the carvings downwards, when the pavement in front of the altar was being removed in 1820. This location suggests the burial of a person of holy status. Beneath was a stone-built vault or grave, containing a large perfect human skeleton, which has not yet been identified or dated.

The present view is that this stone has features which would associate it with Northumbrian sculpture of the date of about 800 or before. Tudor (1934) noted comments by that staff of the English School of Archaeology in Rome who had regarded it as having classical precedents, in particular the drilled eyes and the stiffly striated wings of the angels and that it was a practically unique work.

### A summary of the iconography of the Wirksworth Stone

A section of the left hand side of the stone is missing and sections B and F are the central sections of the stone.

The scenes are as follows:

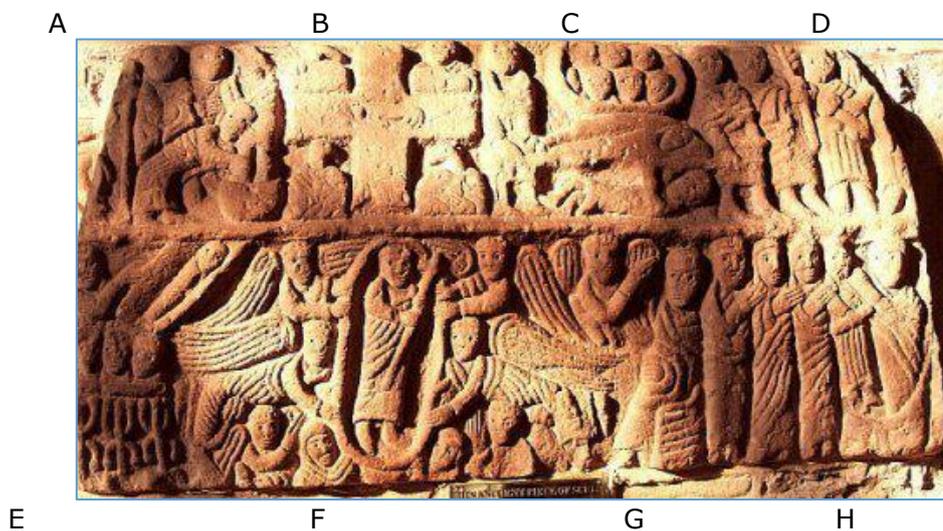
Upper register:

A. The Pedilavum: Christ washing the Disciple's feet: Christ's commandment to mutual love.

B. The Majestas Agni: a central cross: triumph and glory due Christ and his church.

C. The Burial Procession of the Virgin Mary: Glory and reward awaiting the obedient and humble Christian in death.

D. Is partly a continuation of scene C, the burial procession being headed by John carrying a palm leaf. Only the very right hand edge may be a separate scene representing the handing over of the Virgin's soul to an angel, but this broken section has also been interpreted as the Massacre of the Innocents.

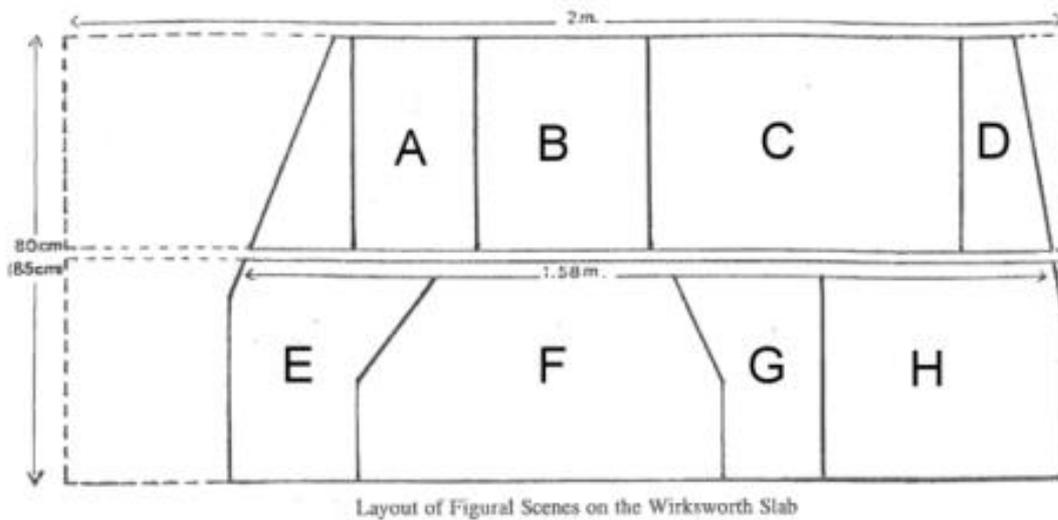


E. Christ in his humility descends into hell to release Adam and his kin.

F. The central scene: Christ ascending to heaven, holding a staff, conveyed by angels.

G. Mary sat in a wicker chair is approached by the Angel of the Annunciation, indicating obedience and humility.

H. The Hypapante: the presentation of the Christ child in the temple, Christ carries a scroll.



Hawkes, in drawing conclusions from the iconography of the stone, felt it operated a complicated set of references and that it did not express the main festivals of the church calendar as earlier writers had suggested, but that the central theme was one of humility and virtue rewarded as exemplified by Christ and the Virgin Mary. As such, Hawkes felt that the stone commemorated a person of holy status of considerable standing and that the sarcophagus may have originally been set up within a double monastery, that is one with both male and female clergy.

In archaeological terms, our view would be that if, in due course, the flooring at the east end of the church by the altar rail needs relaying that the opportunity should be taken for a careful and well ordered examination of the underfloor and if the grave chamber to which this stone appears to refer is found then the bones within should be dated with due care.

**A number of other sculptural items can be found in St Mary's**

Should you have any observations to add about these items do please contact us via our website.

Working anti-clockwise around the church from the Wirksworth Stone:



1  
The old font.  
A plain bowl shaped font that is reputed to have been found outside the church. It is considered to be Norman, but the plain design has caused some to regard it as a Roman relic, it is thought that Roman baptismal tanks in Britain were made of lead though.

Also in the North nave aisle:



2  
Adam and the serpent about 15cm high

South nave aisle:



3

A small section of chevron pattern frieze about 30cm long



4

High up the wall – sections of columns and a capital

South transept west wall:



5

Carving of a lead miner brought from Bonsall in 1863, possibly from between 1300 and 1400. This carving is known as T'owd Man and a replica was recently made of it and returned to Bonsall



6

Two carved heads on a scroll frieze in centre, a short section of diamond freeze on the left (see also nos 9, 12 and 13)

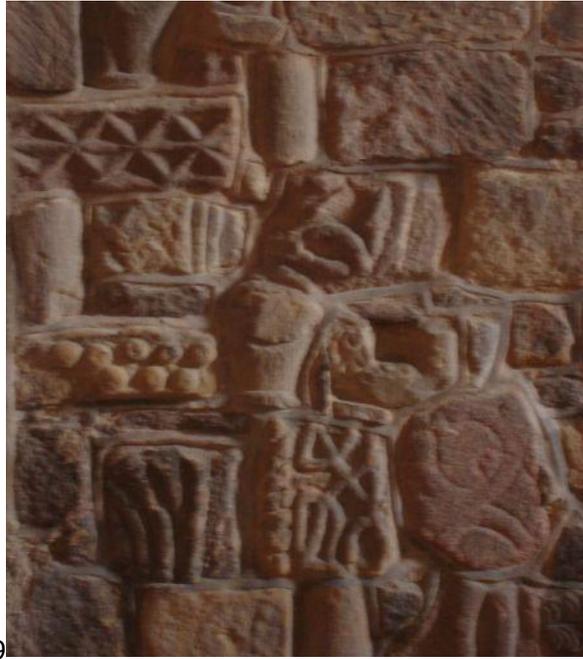
South transept west wall window reveal:



7

Section of vinescroll carving

South transept south wall:



8 Upper part same picture lower part  
(the acorn shaped thing is duplicated in both pictures)



10 Various fragments  
Bottom left includes a section of boxed pattern frieze see also no 17 appears to curve

South transept east wall:



11 Three (probably Norman) corbels supporting a more recent beam corbel  
The lefty one appears to be an animal, the centre a face, the right another animal. See also corbel in number 15

Chancel/tower arch:



12  
Diamond frieze on RH side of chancel/tower arch looking west see also 6, 9 and 13. The much of the church and tower dates from between 1275 -1300 and this diamond frieze may have been a component.

North choir aisle east end:



13  
Top RH of window looking from choir aisle step. 30cm section of diamond frieze. See 6, 9 and 12



14  
In RH corner looking at window about eye level is a single block 20cm x 20cm built into the corner with an X carved on it.

North transept north wall:



15  
Fragments of apparently mediaeval carving including face corbel.  
The double chevron pattern stone in this picture is probably from a Norman period door arch and bears a family resemblance to that above the tympanum at St Peter's Parwich.



16

Fragments of mainly Norman carving. The dragon or wolf carving centre lower is probably Norman from a tympanum, there being similar ones at Parwich and Mellor (north Derbyshire) (Peter Noble, pers comm) and there being similar carved material of between 1100 and 1200 at Hognaston and Tissington churches.

The centre sculpture is known by the local people as "The King and Queen" but it is highly unusual. It probably dates from perhaps between 800 and 1100.

We currently believe that the sculpture is not a King and Queen but a King and a Shepherd. So the sculpture might originally have been part of a Nativity scene where there would have been the baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph as well as three kings, some shepherds and various animals in a barn.

The reason for believing the "Queen" is a shepherd is that she (he) is holding something above their head, and this may have been a sheep carried on the shoulders of the shepherd. Also, it is curious that the right hand is finely sculpted (as is the King's hand) but the left hand appears to be in a glove, perhaps because, although quite rare, sheep can bite.

The heart shape, which makes this person distinctive, is probably a Plaid or Shepherd's Maud (this is an unusual and rare word) - it means a sheet of cloth wrapped around the shoulders of the shepherd and it is a sort of coat, it keeps the shepherd dry and it can be used as a blanket to sleep on or to keep lambs warm. (The reason for the appearance of the shepherd wearing a dress is simply this sculpture is very old and shepherds a thousand years ago did not wear trousers).

North transept west wall (upper):



17

Two fragments of boxed pattern frieze each about 30cm long, same as in 10

## External



18

Exterior wall of the North choir aisle. The knotting would suggest it is part of a Mercian period cross, possibly the one that is known to have stood under the east window of St Mary's in 1710, this cross is marked on the 1710 map of the churchyard, whereas the supposed "mediaeval cross" whose plain square shaft can be seen on the north side of the churchyard is not marked on the 1710 map, suggesting it is a private monument of a post-mediaeval date. The section shown here has close similarities with the cross at Leek and with the north face of the cross shaft at St Peter's at Hope.

## Saxon church crypts

Crypts are very uncommon in churches of the Saxon period. That at St Wystan's at Repton is a rare exception due to its origins as the burial place of the Mercian kings. There is no known crypt at St Mary's Wirksworth. The only underground room is the boiler house, which is brick lined and bears every resemblance to a coal cellar. There are two oddities about it however. The first is that it is transverse to the south nave wall and is built under the south nave wall. This seems lot of effort to go to for a boiler room, if such a room has to be underground, why not just build it outside the church anyway, surely this would be a safer approach in the days of coal-fired boilers; if the boiler house went up in flames then it wouldn't take the church with it. Secondly, behind the boiler in the north-west corner of the boiler room is a bricked up low height arch of unknown purpose. It may have given access to the steam piping which was necessary in former days, but equally it may have given access to something else. We know the church had a well, did this arch give access to a well room? The church was entirely rebuilt in the Norman period and there may have been a crypt from that time, bearing in mind the crypt at St Oswald's Ashbourne was only discovered by accident in 1913. Again in archaeological terms, should the opportunity arise a few bricks should be knocked out of this feature to see if there is anything behind it or whether it is simply a blocked up corner.

## Ossuary coffins

Against the external south wall of the church are two stone coffins, one of these is an ossuary coffin (it has a hole in the bottom) and these types of coffins were allegedly used for the disposition of bones in a bone house (or crypt), the hole apparently permitted the bodily fluids to drain away, and in due course, after decomposition, the bones alone could be buried. Further details or better information on these types of coffins would be of use.

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## See also

Hawkes J and Sidebottom P, 2018, [A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture: Derbyshire and Staffordshire](#), Volume X111, Oxford, University Press, pp239-249

