

# A Note on the Wall Strips of Saxon Churches

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ONE of the distinctive features of Saxon architecture of the tenth and eleventh centuries is the pattern of thin strips of stone applied in relief to the walls of church towers. The examples at Earls Barton (fig. 1) and Barton-on-Humber are the most striking and familiar. The older students assumed that these strips were translations of native half-timbered work into stone.<sup>1</sup> But the researches of Baldwin Brown have led to another view, that the Anglo-Saxon builders had imitated the pilasters of Carolingian and Ottonian churches of the Rhineland, forms that had been brought there from Italy and that ultimately descend from Roman and old Oriental buildings.<sup>2</sup> In his now standard book on English mediaeval architecture, the late A. W. Clapham wrote that 'this derivation seems fully established'.<sup>3</sup> The common use of the words *Lisenen* and *lesene* in describing these wall strips indicates the tendency to refer this English form to a foreign source.

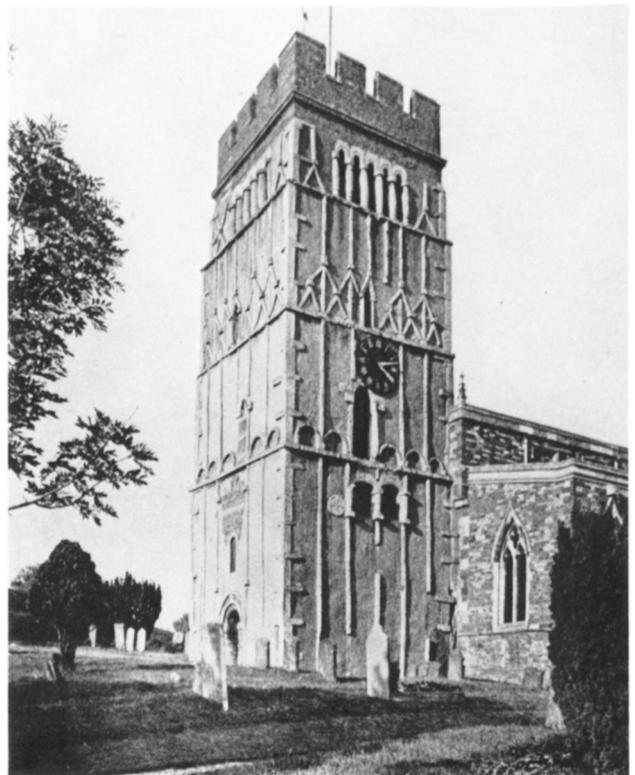
The idea of a wood prototype is nevertheless so obvious and compelling that the older theory continues to attract scholars. One is not surprised to learn that J. Strzygowski, the defender of Nordic originality, was among these.<sup>4</sup> But even Clapham was inclined to make an exception of the tower of Earls Barton. 'There can be little doubt', he wrote, 'that the builders, while employing traditional methods, were consciously imitating timber constructions.'<sup>5</sup>

More recently this question has been revived in the histories of English mediaeval art published by D. Talbot

Rice,<sup>6</sup> and Geoffrey Webb.<sup>7</sup> While recognizing the resemblance of the network of stone strips at Earls Barton to half-timbered construction, both writers acknowledge an influence from the stone pilasters of Rhenish buildings. It was in Germany, they say, that the primitive wood form

6. D. Talbot Rice, *English Art 871-1100* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 52-56.

7. Geoffrey Webb, *Architecture in Britain: The Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1956), pp. 21-23.



1. Earls Barton Tower, Northamptonshire (from Clapham, *English Romanesque*).

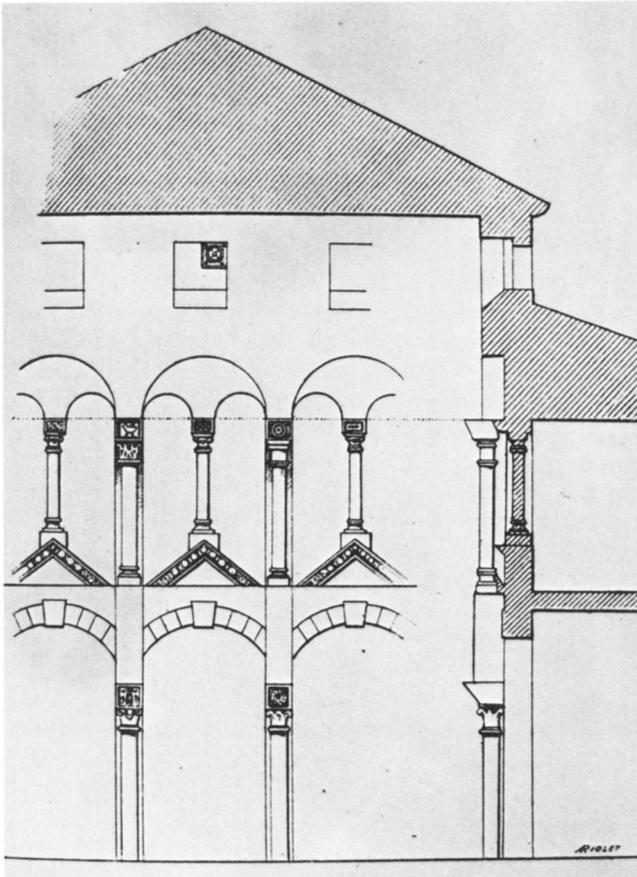
1. John Henry Parker, *An Introduction to the Study of Gothic Architecture* (Oxford and London, 1849), p. 25.

2. G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England*, Volume II, *Ecclesiastical Architecture in England from the Conversion of the Saxons to the Norman Conquest* (London, 1903), pp. 58 ff.

3. A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest* (Oxford, 1930), pp. 108 ff. and pls. 39, 40, 41.

4. Josef Strzygowski, *Early Church Art in Northern Europe* (London, 1929), p. 98.

5. Clapham, *English Romanesque*, p. 109.



2. Basilica of Tigrirt, North Africa (from Gavault, *Tigrirt*).



3. Evangelist, Gospel manuscript, eighth century, Church of Maeseeyck, Belgium (courtesy of Archives Photographiques, Paris).

was first converted into stone; and from the Rhineland it was carried to England. The lack of any sign of such forms in England before the Carolingian period excludes an explanation by native practice in wood.

In his discussion of this motif, Baldwin Brown isolated only one aspect, the thin pilasters ending in mitre arches. Having found this form in German buildings of the Carolingian and Ottonian periods, he was content to accept the latter as models. Strzygowski, however, has drawn attention to the use of oblique strips as braces of the verticals, a quite different form which is undocumented, so far as I know, in the Rhenish churches. This is clearly a device of wood construction, difficult to explain in stone except as a transferred decorative element. The vertical pilasters rise from the apexes of the converging oblique strips in an unconstructive manner (fig. 1). One can point to an example in stone in the sixth century in the basilica of Tigrirt in North Africa (fig. 2); but this is an exceptional instance which the scholar, who first reported and reproduced it, denounced as a bizarre inversion of architectural common sense.<sup>8</sup> The uncanonical mounting of a column on the crown of an arch recurs nevertheless in later mediaeval buildings, even on the South tower of Chartres cathedral which is generally admired as a masterpiece of architectural reason. Before the Romanesque period, only in Saxon England do we find pilasters set above arches in this way; they form an elaborate grid or truss-like structure on the surface of the wall, independent of the main enclosing and supporting masonry.

I wish to bring into this discussion a neglected English work in which the form in question appears almost two centuries before the oldest surviving architectural examples. In a miniature inserted in a gospel book from Aldeneyck (in Belgian Limburg) preserved in the treasury of the church of Maeseeyck, the wooden seat of the Evangelist is formed like the wall strips of Earls Barton (fig. 3). The resemblance is too detailed and complex, the forms are too uncommon, for us to regard this design as unconnected with the patterns of wall strips on the Saxon towers. It seems to me clear evidence that woodworkers in England already employed these forms in the eighth century at a time from which no trace of them has survived in stone and well before the presumed contact with Carolingian and Ottonian art in the Rhineland.

This miniature unfortunately cannot be dated precisely or placed in a definite scriptorium. But its Anglo-Saxon origin is evident enough from the ornament of the border. Like the accompanying canon tables the miniature has been bound with a later manuscript that an uncritical tradition ascribed to native Belgian saints in Aldeneyck.

8. P. Gavault, *Études sur les ruines romaines de Tigrirt* (Paris, 1897), p. 39 and fig. 14, p. 73.

Zimmermann placed the older inserted leaves in southern England and in the last quarter of the eighth century,<sup>9</sup> a dating with which Wilhelm Koehler has agreed.<sup>10</sup> More recently Carl Nordenfalk, to whom we owe important studies of manuscript art, has ventured to place the miniature in York and close to the year 700, as a work connected with the Romanizing policy of Saint Wilfrid.<sup>11</sup> It would be extremely interesting to fill the gap in our small knowledge of the art of Wilfrid's circle by a surviving manuscript.<sup>12</sup> But Nordenfalk's arguments have not convinced me. The forms of the ornament resemble most of all those of Vatican, Barberini ms. latin 570, which is probably a work of the second half of the eighth century.<sup>13</sup> As for the place of origin of the Maeseyck pages, it is still a puzzle. Barberini 570 is attributed by Zimmermann to the south of England,<sup>14</sup> by some students—notably T. D. Kendrick—to Mercia.<sup>15</sup> And other manuscripts in which are found elements related to our miniature—such works as the Prayer Book of Cerne and the Codex Aureus in Stockholm—have also been assigned to both Mercia and

the South.<sup>16</sup> From the distribution of examples of the timber-like patterns in Saxon churches, one would infer that the manuscript is more probably from southern Mercia than from York. The buildings that show forms related to those on the Evangelist's chair are all south of the Humber.<sup>17</sup> Although Barton-on-Humber is not far from York, it is the northernmost example. There the wall strips are a simplified variant of the form on the tower of Earls Barton (which is in Northamptonshire) and lack the essential oblique trussing that is common to the latter and the chair.<sup>18</sup>

If we accept the miniature as an evidence of the practice of wood construction in England in the eighth century with trussed patterns that served as the models of the stone forms on the towers, we must still recall the surprising analogy offered by the ruined basilica of Tizirt. How it is related to the Saxon examples I cannot say. It is a reminder that our knowledge of the history of architecture is extremely fragmentary, and that the connections between works are more complex and obscure than our ideas about types and developments imply.

9. E. H. Zimmermann, *Vorkarolingische Miniaturen* (Berlin 1916), I, 142 ff. and pls. 318–320. On page 303 the manuscript is dated 'c.770'.

10. In *Belgische Kunstdenkmaeler*, Paul Clemen ed., 2 vols. (Munich, 1923), I, 3.

11. Carl Nordenfalk and André Grabar, *Early Medieval Painting* (New York, 1958), pp. 121–122.

12. For Wilfrid see my remarks in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (January 1950), pp. 135–136.

13. See Zimmermann, *Miniaturen*, pls. 313 ff.

14. Zimmermann, *Miniaturen*, p. 140.

15. T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900* (London, 1938), pp. 145–148; also G. L. Micheli, *L'enluminure du haut moyen âge et les influences irlandaises* (Brussels, 1939), p. 28.

16. For the attribution to Canterbury, see Zimmermann, *Miniaturen*, pp. 294–295 (Book of Cerne), pp. 286 ff. (Codex Aureus). Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, p. 165, places the Book of Cerne in Mercia, and on pp. 159–160 the Codex Aureus in Canterbury. Sherman Kuhn, 'From Canterbury to Lichfield', *Speculum* XXIII (1948), 591–629, argues for the Mercian origin of the Codex Aureus. He has been refuted by Kenneth Sisam, 'Canterbury, Lichfield, and the Vespasian Psalter', *The Review of English Studies*, n.s. 7 (1956), 1–10, 113–131. I note that F. Masai, *La Miniature dite Irlandaise* (Brussels, 1947), p. 115, n. 95, attributes the Maeseyck manuscript to Echternach, but offers no reasons for his opinion.

17. See Clapham, *Romanesque*, p. 109, for a list of examples.

18. For Barton-on-Humber, see Baldwin Brown, *The Arts*, figs. 123, 126.