SAINTS, STRUCTURES AND SPIRITUALITY

## CHURCHES AND SOCIETY IN ANGLO-SAXON MERCIA

John Hunt

The surviving fabric of Anglo-Saxon churches offers a tangible link reaching back more than a thousand years. Over four-hundred churches around the country have pre-Conquest features but the great majority, around 80 per cent, are dated broadly between 950 and 1100 AD.

Churches like Stanton Lacy, near Ludlow, where, alongside work of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, remains of the late-tenth or eleventh century incorporate characteristic quoining, pilaster strips and blocked doorways. Similarly, associated with earthworks at Earls Barton in Northamptonshire, the striking late-tenth-century tower is distinguished by pilaster work and openings.

The Cult of Saints

Interest in these buildings is intensified by the fact that they take us to the heart of Anglo-Saxon society, culture and *mentalité*, including the cult of Saints, many drawn from royal and high aristocratic kinships. Saints and relics were a tangible force in the early medieval world, reflecting the standing and prestige of church, region, and kingdom. There was a real equation between saints' cults and the prosperity of a people.

Playing the role of invisible protectors and intercessors between Heaven and Earth, the places associated with saints became focal points of veneration and centres of pilgrimage. Among the pre-eminent sites in Mercia was that of St Chad, whose shrine and associated miracles were mentioned by Bede; recent archaeological discoveries may reflect a deliberate promotion of Chad's shrine when Lichfield was raised to the status of archbishopric.
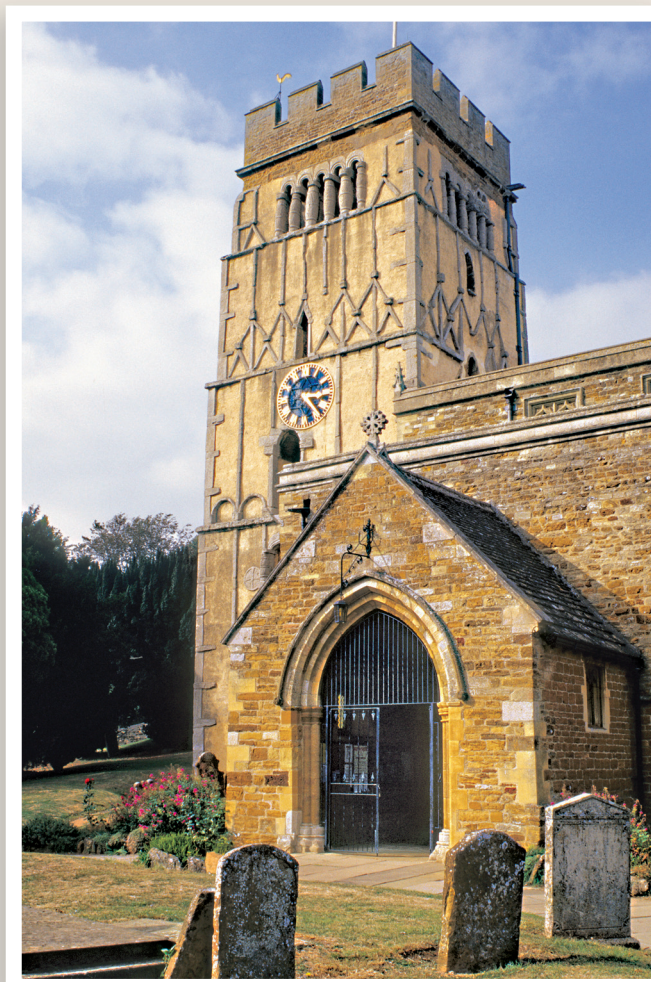
A striking late-tenth century tower at All Saints', Earls Barton, Northamptonshire.

All Saints' Church (photo)./Earls Barton, Northamptonshire, UK/© Edifice/Bridgeman Images

St Wystan and Repton

At least thirty saints' cults were specifically associated with Mercia between the seventh and tenth centuries, among them St Wystan at Repton (Derbyshire), of the Mercian royal kin. Special links with the Mercian royal house, an attraction for the Vikings in 874, are evident through the series of royal burials, establishing a cult of the royal dead under the guardianship of the abbesses and the community.

At least two mausolea were present; the two-celled rectangular chamber located to the west of the church was subsequently followed by the construction of a mausoleum-crypt, close to which a cross-shaft was found whose imagery included a triumphant warrior, the mouth of Hell and perhaps the Resurrection.

Possibly originating as a baptistery, the mausoleum-crypt was originally free-standing on massive megalithic ashlar walls, still forming the body of the crypt, together with heavy multiple plinths and recesses; the roof may have been pyramidal.

The next phase saw the mausoleum joined to the church and the crypt remodelled. The addition of a wooden floor enabled a chancel above the crypt, details of which survive in the fabric. Subsequently, openings were cut through the plinths to create barrel-vaulted windows, and pillars with fine encircling fillet and pilaster columns were added, supporting a stone vault. In the mid-ninth century two processional stairways were cut from the west.

By this time the crypt and chancel were an integral part of the cruciform church and although the layout to the west is unknown, features in the fabric of the church suggest a gallery level and an Anglo–Saxon string course.

The transition at Repton from mausoleum–crypt to reliquary–crypt meant managing pilgrim access to the royal saints. Three 'levels' of engagement between pilgrim and saint were facilitated: veneration at the window of the mortuary chamber; from within the church, via a window in the chancel that opened onto the chamber; and, most intimate of all, entering the crypt itself to approach the shrine.

Crypt design therefore needed to render holy relics approachable and visible and allow visitors ease of movement. An alternative arrangement is a ring crypt, as at Wing, Buckinghamshire, and in the celebrated basilican church at Brixworth, Northamptonshire, where the main part of the church dates to the late–eighth century, with a western tower, stair turret and polygonal apse added before the end of the ninth century.

Pastoral care and spiritual needs

The churches of Mercia were part of a pastoral system meeting the spiritual needs of their localities, the basis of which was the parish, but different from those of today. Below the level of the diocese, Anglo–Saxon England was served by large numbers of minsters, or 'mother churches', functioning within *parochiae* that were far more extensive than the average later medieval parish.

These minsters were collegiate churches, home to communities of priests who looked after the local population. However, by the late Anglo–Saxon period smaller localised parishes, with their own churches (*tunkirkan*), were being carved out of these territories, adding to the hierarchy of churches found across the region's landscape.

Structures and Sculptures

Mercia was likely served by a network of such minsters. Particularly celebrated is Deerhurst in Gloucestershire, where in addition to structural remains several sculptures may be seen *in situ* as integral parts of the building. The church has a complex multi–period structural history, a substantial phase of which is dated to the first half of the ninth century; this included the now-blocked chancel arch, polygonal apse and south porticus, and the western porch up to and including the second-floor chapel. The external walls of the apse carry decorative panelling of pilaster strips rising from a double

Mercian royal burials drew pilgrims to the crypt of St Wystan at Repton, Derbyshire.

Carved panel at Daglingworth, Gloucestershire, depicts St Peter.

Images courtesy J. Hunt

plinth to a string course, above which were gabled areas carrying sculptured panels.

The rich sculptural survivals include a devotional image of the Virgin and Child (Virgin with Christ on a shield) set into the central wall of the tower, perhaps functioning as a protective amuletic carving; on the external wall of the apse a winged archangel that, with its lost companions, once stood guard over the church and its community, may signal an early–ninth century classical revival in western Mercia. A series of animal-head label stops, dating to the early-ninth century, recall details from Oseberg and the Ormside Bowl (c.800 AD), while the font with Celtic trumpet spiral bordered with vine scroll (c.800) may be one of the earliest made-for-purpose fonts in England.

Mercian minster churches with architectural remains include Bibury and Bitton in Gloucestershire; Stanton Lacy and Wroxeter in Shropshire; and Tredington and Wootton Wawen in Warwickshire. Tredington exhibits Anglo-Saxon windows and doorways in the north wall of the nave, with a postulated western gallery, while work on the fabric of Wootton Wawen has shown that the earliest surviving feature, the lower parts of the tower, originally at the heart of a cruciform church, may now be dated to the late-tenth century.

During the tenth and eleventh centuries there was a gradual growth in the numbers of local churches, or *tunkirkan*, built by Anglo-Saxon thegns on their estates, but identifying these churches is not simple. Although lacking structural evidence, Wormleighton in Warwickshire is a probable instance. Barrow and St Eata's Atcham in Shropshire, and Coln Rogers and Leonard Stanley in Gloucestershire may reflect such developments, as might Daglingworth with its series of late-tenth- or early-eleventh-century carved panels. Major changes were affecting English society and the kind of relationship that communities wanted with their churches. ●

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Further Reading
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