

The Lichfield Angel



LICHFIELD
CATHEDRAL

Discovered in 2003 the Lichfield Angel is a remarkable survival of early medieval sculpture. The carved limestone panel, which is dated to around 800 A.D., comprises three separate fragments which are thought to have formed the corner of a shrine chest, possibly that of St Chad (d.672).

In the summer of 2003, archaeological work in the nave of the Cathedral was undertaken prior to the installation of a retractable platform. Little or nothing was known about the archaeology of the nave although it was generally thought that the Anglo-Saxon Cathedral must have been located west of the Church of St Mary, evidence for which exists under the choir. Dr Warwick Rodwell, the Cathedral Archaeologist, undertook the excavation and the results were extraordinary...



Shrine of St Chad?

Evidence of the Anglo-Saxon Cathedral was found, the north and south lines of the Norman nave were confirmed (the second of the three cathedrals on the site) and a number of burials were uncovered. But most significantly at the east end of the site a sunken chamber was discovered with the subsequent embellishment of a canopy marking its honour and reverence. Such a structure suggested a shrine or grave and the position and the description accorded with the description by Bede that leads us to believe that this is the original position of the shrine of St Chad, built by Hedda early in the 8th Century.

Furthermore, recovered from the excavation were three fragments of an Anglo-Saxon sculptured limestone panel. The pieces together form a half of one side of a hollowed limestone block. The carving depicts an angel, his right hand raised in blessing and the left bearing a foliate sceptre. The decoration is of the highest quality with excellently preserved Anglo Saxon surface pigment. The figure of the angel is red and the feathered wings coloured red with white tips. The background seems to be pure white. Almost certainly the figure is that of the Archangel Gabriel and speculation leads us to believe that this is one half of an Annunciation scene – the other part, possibly still beneath the floor, being the Blessed Virgin Mary.

A Remarkable Survival

Professor Rosemary Cramp and Jane Hawkes describe the Angel as "a remarkable survival – of European importance when considered in the context of Early Medieval sculpture. Technically the quality and assurance of the carving is outstanding and one is able to appreciate this fully because of the lack of weathering and the unusual survival of so much surface pigment." They continue: " this carving is crucially important for the light it throws on the chronology of Anglo Saxon sculpture ... panels of single or paired standing figures of angels or saints, or rows of the apostles with Mary and Christ under floriated arcades, are a feature of Mercian carvings which have usually been dated c800 and associated with the aspirations of King Offa to rival the artistic achievements of the Carolingian world".

The Angel was publicly unveiled in the Cathedral in February 2006 and displayed for a month before further research was undertaken to gain a better understanding of the panel's condition. Following minimal conservation work, the Angel returned to the Cathedral in June 2007 for permanent exhibition alongside the St Chad Gospels.