

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSIONS

The five counties included in this volume (Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire) cover an area of about five thousand square miles and spread from the Welsh borders to the heart of Midland England and from north of Shrewsbury to the centre of Bristol. In the east and south stone suitable for carving comes predominantly from the oolitic limestone quarries of the Cotswolds, while in the west and north the stone is generally sandstone (Chapter IV). Roman ruins offered another source of stone, while it seems reasonable to suggest that wood was probably also used for sculpture, perhaps especially in those areas that were thickly wooded in the Anglo-Saxon period (see Chapter III, p. 24).

It is a widely acknowledged paradox that information about Mercia for the eighth century, during which the Mercian kings were at their most powerful, is all derived from external, and seldom friendly, sources. 'Indeed, it is only in terms of extant architecture, sculpture and manuscripts that we can see the skills of Mercian artisans and understand the cultural vibrancy of the Mercian supremacy at work in the core of the kingdom itself' (Story 2003, 175). With a few exceptions, this continues to be the case during subsequent centuries.

Western Mercia contained major Southumbrian centres of learning from as early as the eighth century. 'The corpus of documentary evidence for Offa's reign (including charters attested or confirmed by him, as well as charters issued in his name) comprises approximately seventy texts preserved in the archives of about fifteen religious houses in Mercia' (Keynes 2005, 12); these include twenty-nine from Worcester and five from Evesham. Sadly none have been preserved from Hereford or from Lichfield (just outside the study area). Illuminated Psalters, Books of Prayers, and other devotional works, including the Hereford Gospels (Hereford Cathedral Library, MS P.1.2: this volume Ills. 771–2) and also perhaps the well known Book of Cerne (Cambridge, University Library, MS Ll.1.10: this volume Ills. 773–4), were being produced

as early as the late eighth and the first half of the ninth century, and in the later tenth and the eleventh centuries by centres such as Worcester, Hereford and Winchcombe (Alexander 1978, 63–4, 84–6, cat. 38, 66; Brown 1996, 178–81; Temple 1976, 78–9, 97–8, 105–6, cat. 60, 80, 88, 89). Relatively little metalwork that can be dated between the eighth and eleventh centuries has been found in the region, but the objects that have survived offer glimpses of the quality that once would have been seen in both religious and secular settings. The ninth-century gold ring from Berkeley (Gloucestershire) is exquisite, the product of craftsmanship of the highest order (Ill. 780; Webster forthcoming). Part of the design of the ring consists of four animal heads for which the closest parallels are the carved animal heads at Deerhurst (Ills. 153–210). There is a later eighth-century key from Gloucester, with cast, three-dimensional animal heads on the bow (Webster and Backhouse 1991, 222–3, cat. 176), and the complex openwork lamp- or censer-cover from Pershore in Worcestershire, dated late tenth to early eleventh century (Ill. 781; Backhouse *et al.* 1984, 90, cat. 74). There is also the tantalising fragment of a mount, possibly eleventh century in date, found at Weston-under-Penyard in Herefordshire. The mount is decorated with red and yellow enamel and niello work, and is perhaps from a portable reliquary shrine (La Niece and Stapleton 1993, 148–51; Redknapp 2009, 366). A fine early eleventh-century Tau-cross, carved from walrus ivory and still bearing traces of gilding, was found in Alcester, Warwickshire (Ill. 782). The carving depicts Christ on the Cross on one side of the cross-head and Christ Treading the Beasts on the other. The heads of dragons act as terminals on the top of the volutes, while the volutes themselves are covered with luxurious foliage (Beckwith 1972, 52, 124, cat. 29, ill. 65–6). An oval reliquary or pectoral cross, carved from walrus ivory and of late tenth- or eleventh-century date, has a possible Gloucestershire provenance. The carving shows a haloed Christ on the cross below the Hand of God and surrounded by the

four Evangelists in small roundels (Beckwith 1972, 124–5, cat. 32, ill 68). Fragments of a tenth-century wall painting have been found at St Oswald's Priory in Gloucester (Heighway 1990, 79–88; Heighway and Bryant 1999, 122–4: this volume Ill. 791), while the *in situ* polychrome decoration at Deerhurst (Chapter X, and see below) still offers an idea of the richness of painted decoration that would have been found in many Anglo-Saxon churches.

Surviving examples like those above are, however, rare and it is clear that carved stone sculpture offers the largest body of creative work from Mercia for the period in question. Companion volumes in the Corpus series will cover Derbyshire and Staffordshire, and Leicestershire and the Eastern Midlands, while this volume presents a coherent and important collection of west Mercian sculpture. The catalogue consists of 271 sculptures from 103 sites. The largest number comes from Gloucestershire, but there are major pieces from all five counties.

Many of the late eighth-/ early ninth-century carvings show a distinctive regional treatment of design motifs, and in 1977 Rosemary Cramp suggested that this might be because the carvers were drawing upon (now lost) earlier Insular traditions of art in the western Midlands (see Chapter I and Cramp 1977, 192, 225–30). A tantalising glimpse of such material might in fact survive in the form of the illuminated pages of the Hereford Gospels, an eighth-century manuscript which may have been produced in western England or Wales (Alexander 1978, 63–4, cat. 38, ills. 197–9: this volume Ills. 771–2).

The Anglo-Saxon carvings of western Mercia range in date from the eighth to the eleventh century, with the earliest being the Lypiatt Cross from near Bisley in Gloucestershire (Bisley Lypiatt 1, Ills. 54–7, 60–6), on which there are tall figures reminiscent of those on the Bewcastle cross in Cumbria. High crosses have been found in all five counties, with as many as seven crosses of eighth- and ninth-century date from the city of Gloucester (Ills. 259–91, 356–62, 365–70). Like much of the carving, these high crosses would almost certainly have been painted. On the Lypiatt Cross the body of the figure on the front face is outlined with holes that were probably used to secure engraved metal strips applied as decorative edging to further enhance the carving. It is possible that the square socket at the point where the head should be on this figure, was a fixing point for a head carved in different stone or for a halo that was also made of engraved metal. On another cross, the mid ninth-century shaft from Tenbury Wells in Worcestershire (Ills. 660–7), there is

a slot into which a reliquary could be placed and then covered by a stone or metal panel.

There is one particularly significant group of early ninth-century sculptures from the area: the pieces in this group are closely related in style and imagery and can be seen as the products of a single centre or group of carvers. All four pieces in this 'Crophorne' group (Chapter III, p. 25, Ills. 278–86, 496–501, 562–9, 621–33) are carved from oolitic limestone and this suggests that the centre of production was in Worcestershire or Gloucestershire. As the seat of the bishop, Worcester itself is perhaps the most likely place, although a good case can also be made for Gloucester. These carvings lie at the centre of many west Mercian sculptural traditions and they exerted a widespread influence in the area and beyond.

The stone carvings also display the effects of continuing patronage on the part of an elite, still Anglo-Saxon in character in this part of Mercia; this continuity contrasts with the eastern and northern parts of the country that were profoundly affected by Danish settlement and ultimately subsumed in the Danelaw, and also with the areas of Norse settlement in the north-west, and with the Viking kingdom in the north. In those areas carvers had to respond to the demands and taste of Scandinavian patrons, while in the western Midland counties and adjacent counties of Wessex it is possible to trace the unbroken development of themes from the late eighth century through to the tenth. The extensive carved menagerie of Mercian animals and birds gradually changes from naturalistic representation to more abstracted and serpentine forms. There is a significant amount of figure carving, including many pieces of the highest quality and the remains of at least two monumental roods (Bibury 6–7 and Bitton 1–4 in Gloucestershire, Ills. 41–2, 67–84). In the early tenth century sumptuous foliate carving, such as the decoration on the St Oswald's grave-cover (Gloucester St Oswald 5, Ills. 292–8), shows that western Mercia retained patrons who were prepared to commission such work, as well as craftsmen with the intellectual and artistic capacity to absorb new continental ideas and to create influential and innovative sculpture. This is surely an indication of the growing confidence of the kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia, united under King Alfred and his descendants, and the desire to establish a strong Anglo-Saxon identity in the face of Danish Viking aggression and occupation. Gloucester was probably the principal centre for Æthelred and Æthelflæd, the Mercian leaders during the latter part of the ninth and early tenth centuries, while Worcester continued to

be a major ecclesiastical centre throughout the period (Keynes 1998, 14, 24–6, 36–7).

Such was the dynamic creative force that was derived from this new-found Anglo-Saxon confidence and from the combination of long-used west Mercian sculptural imagery with new continental ideas that, with the exception of one of the grave-covers from St Mary's in Shrewsbury (Ills. 553–4), it was only in the first half of the eleventh century that Scandinavian-inspired sculptural imagery began to appear in the area, with the Ringerike-style carvings from near Cirencester in Gloucestershire (Chapter III, p. 26, Ills. 27–30, 426–8). By this time Cnut had become king of England; the aristocracy of western Mercia included a number of military retainers of Danish origin (Williams 1986), and many other members of the aristocracy doubtless had Danish links.

It thus seems reasonable to suggest that the styles deployed in stone sculpture during the ninth and tenth centuries provide little evidence for cultural contact between western Mercia and the Scandinavian areas of the country to the east and north. This is particularly true of the relatively large amount of sculpture that survives from the area covered by the diocese of Worcester, the old kingdom of the Hwicce. Conversely, contact with Wessex was maintained and probably enhanced. In the ninth century similar styles, such as the development of the Colerne-style creatures (Chapter VI, p. 69), can be found in both areas, while the foliate styles that appear in tenth-century Mercian carving have many Wessex parallels. It is important also to acknowledge that Wessex must have offered a crucial conduit for the passage of new ideas.

The interaction between the sculptural traditions of western Mercia and Wales is more difficult to establish, in part because of the relative paucity of material. The area may have produced works in the widespread Insular manuscript tradition (see above), and early 'British' inscribed stones are found on either side of the border, including the fifth- or sixth-century Cunorix stone from Wroxeter in Shropshire and the sixth-century slab from Llanveynoe in Herefordshire (Ills. 521–2, 571). The Welsh princes of Powys and Gwynedd were the allies of the Mercian king Penda in many battles, especially with Northumbrian forces, but by the late seventh and eighth centuries there were frequent hostilities between the peoples of this area, and there is abundant evidence for continuing conflict between Mercia and the Welsh into the tenth century (e.g. Davies 1982, 108, 114, 196–7). By the ninth century the most westerly areas of Mercia (now Herefordshire, Shropshire and western Gloucestershire) and the

adjacent Welsh kingdoms (now Brecknockshire, Monmouthshire, Montgomeryshire and Radnorshire) were divided by Offa's Dyke. And yet, despite this antagonistic background, the varied nature of much of the sculptural material especially from Shropshire and Herefordshire, and the close parallels observed between certain carvings, offers indications that contact with Wales was maintained. On the Welsh side of the border this is perhaps most apparent in some of the tenth-/eleventh-century panelled crosses and architectural carvings in what is now Monmouthshire and Glamorgan (Redknap and Lewis 2007). Indeed by the end of the early 880s the Welsh kingdoms from this area had actually entered into alliances with Alfred for protection against Gwynedd and 'the might and tyrannical behaviour of Ealdorman Æthelred and the Mercians' (Keynes 1998, 20), although this did not mean that they were immune from Mercian nor indeed more general English aggression (Davies 1982, 112–16).

Direct Irish influence does not seem to be a major feature of west Mercian stone carving. It is, however, possible that the unique style and imagery employed on the ninth-century Deerhurst font and the nearby cross-shaft from Elmstone Hardwicke, both in Gloucestershire (Ills. 132–44, 242–7), are the work of an Irish or Irish-trained carver (see catalogue discussions, pp. 165, 201).

Other individual carvers or groups of carvers can be identified in the 'Cropthorne' group and the Cotswold Ringerike-influenced gravestones (see above), and also in a group of carvings that includes the panels from Daglingworth in Gloucestershire (Chapter III, p. 27, Ills. 100–6).

Architectural carving begins to appear in the eighth or ninth century, only a short while after the earliest crosses. Examples include a decorated hood-moulding and impost from Berkeley in Gloucestershire and part of a string-course carved with geese or chickens from Wroxeter in Shropshire (Ills. 10–12, 21–4, 570). The most comprehensive collection of architectural carving comes from Deerhurst in Gloucestershire, and much of this unique ensemble is still *in situ* in the Anglo-Saxon fabric (Chapter V, p. 54, Ills. 145–225). Here it is possible to come very close to aspects of the original, ninth-century visual richness that carving added to the exterior and interior of the church. This is further emphasised by the polychrome that survives on some of the Deerhurst carvings and as a (fragmentary) painted plant-scroll on the chancel arch (see Chapter X and colour *frontispiece*, Plate 1). There is also a tenth-century stone panel painting of a saint

at a high level in the east wall of Deerhurst church (Fig. 32F; Ill. 151), a remnant of a high level chapel (Ills. 215–17) and a further indication of the structural complexity that could be achieved by Anglo-Saxon master masons.

Sadly, with the exception of Deerhurst and a few other sites, very little of the earlier architectural sculpture recorded in this volume remains *in situ*. Much was found, reused as building stone, during Victorian church restoration and few of these pieces can be dated by the context in which they were found. However, at St Oswald's Priory in Gloucester a major campaign of archaeological excavation from 1975–1983 resulted not only in the recovery of the complete plan and partial elevation of the tenth-century church, but also one of the most important collections of sculpture from stratigraphically excavated contexts to be found in southern Britain, the others being from Repton and Winchester (Chapter IX, p. 105, Ills. 265–355, 470–6). The archaeological approach to the analysis of standing buildings has also brought valuable additional insights, especially in relation to the reused capitals and bases in the eastern slype at Worcester Cathedral (Ills. 677–701) and the context for the later tenth- and eleventh-century figured panels at Daglingworth, Gloucestershire (Ills. 100–6).

Other figured wall panels of similar date include examples from Beverstone, Gloucestershire, and Bristol (Ills. 25–6, 786), and smaller panels at Wormington, Gloucestershire (Ills. 447–8) and Bromyard,

Herefordshire (Ill. 502). At Bibury and Bitton in Gloucestershire (Ills. 41–2, 67–84) the remains of large-scale roods survive, some elements of which are still *in situ* on the chancel-arch walls. New-style trapezoidal capitals carved with dramatic fans of Winchester-style foliage can also still be found *in situ* at Bibury (Ills. 43–4).

Other carvings represent the remains of interior screens and church furnishings. As well as the fonts that continue to excite debate (Chapter V, p. 62, and Appendix K, p. 381), there are parts of shrines, altar pedestals, tomb finials, and the small but exquisite ninth-century Lechmere Stone (from Hanley Castle in Worcestershire) which is a three-dimensional sacred image of the highest quality (Ills. 635–45).

In the course of the first half of the tenth century, Mercia was subsumed into the unified kingdom of England; Edward the Elder controlled Mercia directly after the death of Æthelflæd in 918, and Edward's son Æthelstan was able to establish his rule over all England in 927. Despite some subsequent vicissitudes, the later tenth-century kings were able to complete the creation of a unified kingdom (Keynes 1999a). However, this volume shows that, especially in the late eighth, ninth and tenth centuries, Mercia offered a vibrant milieu in which influential artistic ideas could develop and spread, and that, even in the unified kingdom, Mercian craftsmen continued to produce works of the highest quality.