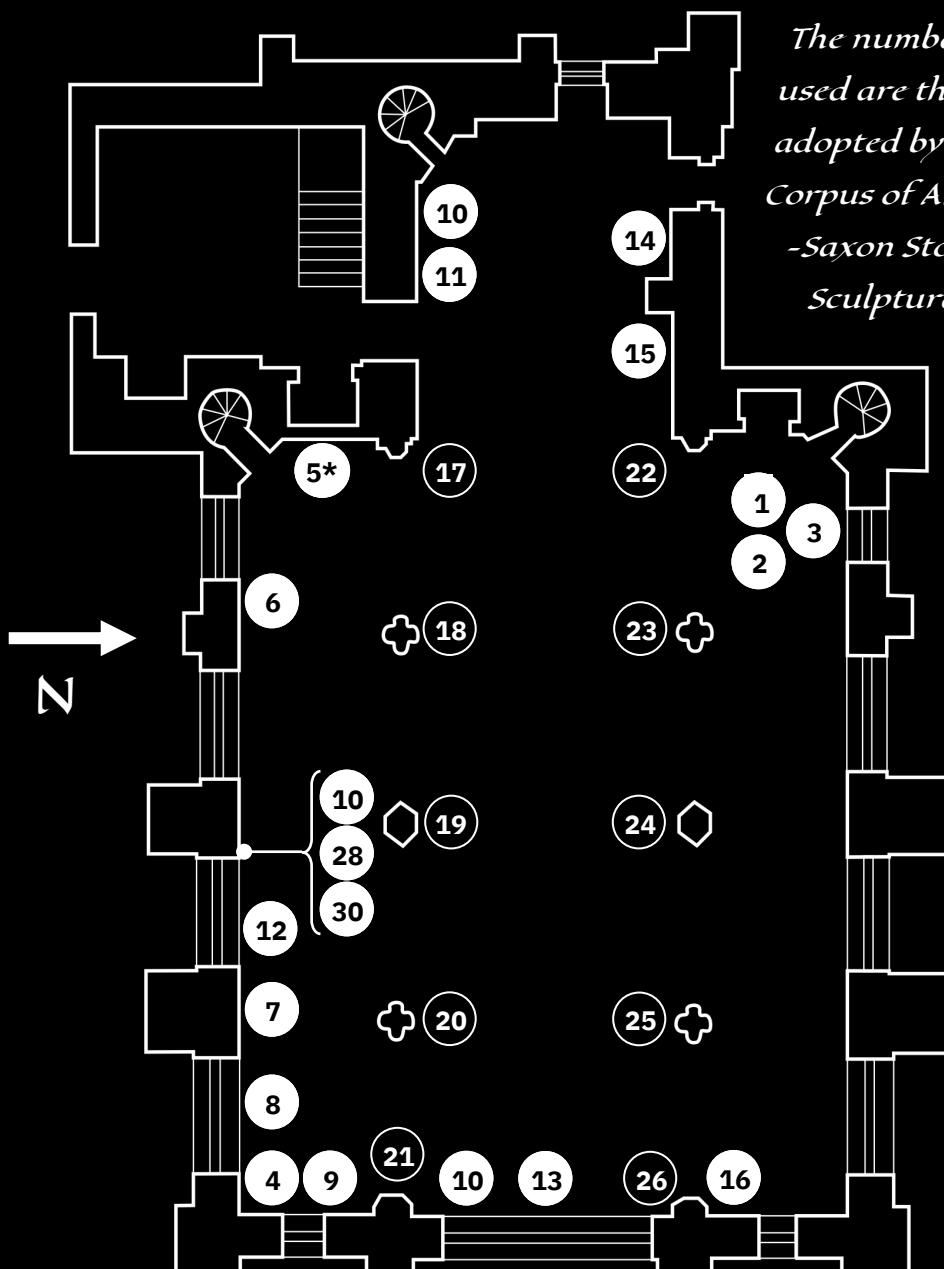


BREEDON PRIORY CHURCH



The Anglo-Saxon Sculpture



The numbers used are those adopted by the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture.

KĒY

- 1 Sculptures located at ground/eye level
- 5* The Breedon Angel is located in the bell-ringing chamber above the tower, which is normally locked. A perfect replica can be viewed here.
- 17 Sculptures located above the arches of the nave

Introduction

Monks from *Medeshamstede* (modern Peterborough) founded a monastery at Breedon in the late 7th century. At this time, Breedon was situated near the centre of Mercia, one of the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England. The hill that the monastery was built on had previously been an Iron Age hillfort; the bank and ditch of this can still be seen to the south of the church.



The best preserved section of the Iron Age hillfort's bank, pictured here, was destroyed in the 1950s when the quarry expanded.

The monastery at Breedon quickly became very important and in 731AD its abbot, Tatwin, was made Archbishop of Canterbury. This status continued into the 9th century, when Mercia was the most powerful of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. The monastery's importance can be seen in the sculptures that were created during this time.



*This was once part of the clasp from a small Anglo-Saxon box or shrine. Richly decorated with yellow and red enamel, it hints at the wealth of Breedon's monastery**

Despite the large number of sculptures preserved at Breedon, many more have been lost. However, enough have survived to give a taste of what the Mercian monastery would have looked like. The sculptures were painted and glass inserted in the eyes of some of the figures, making them seem almost alive in the dimly lit church. For the average Anglo-Saxon, it would have been an otherworldly experience.



The halo of this saint from (4) would have been picked out in yellow paint, or even gold leaf.

With his moustache and shining eyes, he would have made quite the impression.

** This is now in the care of Leics. County Council Museums*

Influences



Creatures like these fighting monsters echo pagan Anglo-Saxon stories including that of Beowulf, which was probably written down by a Mercian monk.

When they first arrived in England, the pagan Anglo-Saxons made beautiful artwork in textiles, metal and wood. As they converted to Christianity, they started to build stone churches and create stone sculptures. The sculptures at Breedon were carved by the finest craftsmen in the kingdom. Breedon was founded by monks from *Medeshamstede* (now Peterborough) and the links between the two monasteries can be seen in the sculptures, as artwork similar to Breedon's is found at Peterborough and two other churches near there: Fletton and Castor. Sculpture from all four of these places was carved from stone quarried at Barnack, historically in the Soke of Peterborough.



The Virgin Mary's fingers are extremely long, emphasising her blessing of an object (probably a book) she holds in her other hand. The bending of the ring finger indicates this is a Greek – as opposed to Roman – style blessing.

Some of the themes the carvers chose, such as elaborate geometric patterns known as interlace, can be seen in other Anglo-Saxon artwork, for example the Staffordshire hoard. However, other images come from much further afield. Note the way the Virgin Mary and Breedon Angel (*front and rear covers*) are dressed, and the distinctive gesture they give with their right hands. This art style was influenced by the Byzantine Empire centred on Constantinople (modern day Istanbul) and highlights how well Breedon was connected with the wider Christian world. The number and quality of the sculpture shows that whoever ordered their creation was extremely wealthy. Whilst we will never know who they were, it is likely they were the elite of Mercian society.

Types of Sculpture

There are four types of sculpture found at Breedon:

Crosses. These would have stood outside the church. Originally painted, they were intended to be viewed from all four sides, with carefully chosen designs telling the audience important things about Christianity or the people who paid for the cross.



Shrines. Three panels with parading saints would have once been part of a rectangular box containing the bones of a saint, perhaps St Hardulph himself.



Panels. These are panels of people or animals set into the walls of the church.



Friezes. The most common type of sculpture at Breedon, these fall into two types: a narrower frieze of interlaced plants, and a wider frieze that was much more varied. Some of the images on these were influenced by the art of the Byzantine Empire.

We cannot be sure about how the sculpture was displayed but, based on wall paintings in Italy, we think that the panels would have been set into the walls of the church, with the frieze running underneath them. Below that would have hung tapestries—possibly from the Byzantine Empire—containing exotic images that were echoed in images within the friezes.

Guide to the Sculpture

The numbers used are those adopted by the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture. For their location, please refer to the plan on the inside cover. Please note, there is no (27) and (29). (27) only exists as a 19th-century cast and (29) as an 1809 drawing. Both the originals have been lost.

Cross Shafts



1 The side facing into the church has two images: below, Adam and Eve pick the forbidden fruit from the Garden of Eden whilst the serpent, wrapped around the trunk, watches on. Above, King David is anointed by Samuel with a horn of oil (*left*). Moving anticlockwise, the next side shows an elite rider on horseback over a leaping animal. The back of the shaft shows a winged demon, whilst the fourth side probably shows a saint.



2 The animals on this shaft, enmeshed in elaborate interlace, are typical of Mercian art of the late 8th and early 9th centuries. On the side facing (1), is an animal known as a 'Mercian Beast' (*left*).



3 The tallest cross shaft was found outside the porch in the early 19th century and promptly reused as a door lintel! The back of the shaft was originally decorated with a similar design to (13), but this was hacked off when the shaft was inserted above the turret doorway in the south aisle.

Shrine Fragments

4 The saints on these panels would have originally been identifiable as individual saints, as they all have different hairstyles and carry different items. Like (9), their eyes are deeply drilled to hold pieces of glass, which would make them glitter in the dimly lit church.



Panels

5 The 'Breedon Angel' is shown in the process of stepping out of its frame, one hand raised in a distinctive Greek blessing. Thought to be the Angel Michael, the angel still has traces of paint on its wings. It has been in its current position in the church tower since the 11th century.



6 There is some mystery over this sculpture. Is it a depiction of a saint at the foot of the Cross during the Crucifixion, or part of a group of saints in frames similar to (4)? Like (3), it was discovered in 1959 in the rubble core of an 18th-century buttress surrounding the northwest corner of the north aisle.



7 This depiction of a lion is not of the same quality as the other sculptures and it is also one of the few not to be carved from Barnack limestone. As with almost all the sculptures in a lead frame, it was outside until the 1920s and has been heavily weathered.



8 These two well-styled men with their leaf-topped rods are probably prophets. The depth of the carving shows how the sculptors who worked at Breedon were amongst the best in Mercia.





9 This is a very rare Anglo-Saxon depiction of a woman. Although the sculpture lacks a halo (which was probably painted on), this is probably the Virgin Mary. Like (4), she has drilled eyes for glass and like (5), her right hand makes a Greek blessing. In her left hand she carries a book, possibly a symbol of her son, Jesus Christ, or 'the Word Made Flesh'.

Friezes



10 **13** These friezes, slightly narrower than the others, are typical of Anglo-Saxon sculpture. Although of two different designs, both use twisted vines to form elaborate scrollwork decorated with berries, trefoils and cupped leaves.



11 Although heavily weathered (the two on the right were outside until the 1920s), these three pieces showcase the variety of decoration in the friezes, with fretwork, strange beasts and people picking fruit.



12 The heads at either end were added in the later medieval period, when these sculptures were on the corner of the porch. The monsters in the central panel are reminiscent of those in pagan Anglo-Saxon stories, which were later written down by Christian monks.



14 Also seen in (12), this piece of interlace highlights the Mercian love of visual puzzles, with equal armed crosses hidden amongst interlocking circles.

15 This piece has similar designs to (11) and (16), suggesting they may have once joined to form a continuous frieze.



16 Only discovered in 1959, these well-preserved birds were placed here in the 13th century, when the south aisle was built.



17-21 These sculptures, situated above the north and south aisles, have never been outside and are thus some of the best preserved.

17 On the left is a bird, whilst on the right is a crouched spearman, poised to strike at his prey. The superb execution of the hunter exemplifies the standard of sculpture at Breedon.



18 These winged creatures have been influenced by Eastern Mediterranean art that travelled via Constantinople to the rest of Europe, including Breedon.



19 Like other sculptures above the aisle, the middle of this sculpture has been damaged. This was probably done after Henry VIII's Reformation, when the friezes were covered with plaster and whitewash.



20 The damage on this piece was probably done after the Reformation, either by an attempt to hide it or through scaffolding erected as part of restoration in the late 18th-century.





21

The lack of carving on the left hand side of this piece indicates it was at the end of the frieze, although it could have been painted.



22

These two birds of prey have strong similarities to birds on the Hedda Stone at Peterborough, which was carved at the same time as the Breedon sculptures.



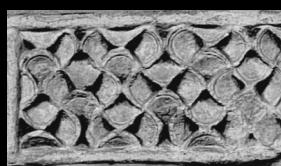
23

The similarities between this and other fragments suggest that what are now separate blocks were once part of a continuous frieze running along the walls of the Anglo-Saxon church.



24

This piece shows how the frieze was originally made up of a number of themes separated by vertical bands. The geometric design on the right may have been inspired by continental art.



25

This piece, which is actually upside down, is largely made up of pelta decoration. It is inspired by ornamentation originating in the eastern Mediterranean, primarily the Byzantine Empire.



26

The horseman on this piece is very well preserved, although the sculpture is slightly lower than those elsewhere in the aisle. This suggests it may have been repositioned in the 18th century, when the east wall was rebuilt.

Other fragments

28 This fragment of a leg and wine jars has been interpreted as part of the Wedding at Cana, where Jesus miraculously turned water into wine.



30 This is a tiny fragment of a much larger piece with an arching top, now broken. The small imp-like face peering out from the foliage is beautifully carved, and reminds the viewer that what can be seen now is just a small fraction of the sculptures once present here.



This doorway in the north wall of the tower may be the only piece of surviving Anglo-Saxon architecture at Breedon.

What happened to the monastery?

Within a century of the sculptures being created, the monastery at Breedon was abandoned. Ninth-century politics, including warring kingdoms and the increasing presence of the Vikings, meant monastic life had become impossible. However, the church survived until the Norman Conquest of 1066, when it was completely rebuilt. Around 1123, it became an Augustinian priory. Many pieces of Anglo-Saxon sculpture were built into the interior and exterior walls of the new church, ensuring their survival until the present day.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit. If you are able, a donation towards the upkeep of this historic building would be very welcome and ensure it remains open for all to enjoy.

Breedon Priory Church has one of the largest and finest collections of Anglo-Saxon sculpture in the country, created between c.775-825AD. This guide is an introduction to the sculpture that survives today and is based on recent studies by the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, Durham University. For more detailed information, please visit www.ascorpus.ac.uk



Most of the sculptures have been scanned in 3D and can be viewed online. See our website for further details: www.breedonpriorychurch.org

