

## THE *TAU*-CROSS CAPITALS IN THE UNDER-CROFT OF CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL.

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IN his lecture to the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral in the Chapter House on June 18th, 1932, attention was drawn by Sir Charles Peers to the two large *Tau*-cross capitals crowning two pillars which have been added to Ernulf's undercroft for the support of two of William of Sens's pillars in the choir above. I should be grateful if I may make some remarks on these capitals (and on a third which has been used on another support further west in the undercroft).

If the reader will refer to Professor Willis's plan at the end of his *Architectural History of Canterbury Cathedral* he will easily make out the positions of these pillars. They are additions which William of Sens has had to make to the undercroft of Ernulf, owing to the altered spacing of the arcade of the new choir of 1175-1178. The two easterly pillars have been placed where they stand now to support the two pillars marked No. X on Professor Willis's plan. William had got as far as this when he fell and was crippled. Possibly the change in pillar No. X, where the lower octagonal drums cease and cylindrical drums begin, is the place where the French William ended his work in 1178 and where the English William continued the building of these pillars in 1180 or 1181.

The third capital which interests me supports Professor Willis's pillar numbered No. VI on the south side. The corresponding support on the north side is entirely 1177 and 1178 work and has not the same interest. Pillars No. VI in the choir are the western supports of the great crossing vault at the "turning," on which William of Sens was working when the catastrophe described by Gervase overtook him.

I turn first to those two eastern pillars and capitals in the undercroft. They recall immediately the *tau*-cross capitals in the Chapel of St. John in the Tower of London, of about 1080, Gundulf's work, and suggest any degree of Norman antiquity, even the days of Lanfranc and William the Conqueror. Indeed the question they raise is whether William of Sens has found ready for his use here Lanfranc's masonry, which was already 100 years old (1077-1178), or whether in these capitals and pillars we have examples of the work of Ernulf who, when Anselm was Archbishop, lengthened the choir of Lanfranc about 150 feet eastward, twenty or thirty years after 1077.

The two pillars (which the reader will perhaps allow me to call "Jachin" and "Boaz" for convenience's sake) are 126 inches in girth. Their capitals measure at the top sixty-one inches square. The capitals are patched up in places but were made originally of two large stones, each measuring 60 by 30 inches in length and breadth. Their depth is about 15 inches. The pillar on the north side (Fig. I) is built in six courses. The capital is of two stones. The next course three: then four: then three: then three: and the base is of two stones like the capital. The whole height of the columns of Ernulf cannot have been needed in this substructure of William's, for Ernulf's pillars (including base and capital) must have been nearly 17 feet, and "Jachin" and "Boaz" thrust themselves into Ernulf's groin-vaulting of the undercroft at about 14 feet from the ground.

As to the capitals themselves, they have (roughly) the same design, both of them, on all four faces: in the middle of the face the *tau*-cross: at each corner a volute. The volute is the curl over of a large plain leaf of foliage. This leaf does not quite fill all the space between the corner and the *tau*-cross and the interval has been marked with four or five lines more or less parallel to the outer edge of the leaf, as though the sculptor had wished to suggest leaf behind leaf, or petal behind petal, of a tulip flower or, say, of the coats of an onion. The *tau*-cross measures  $16\frac{1}{2}$  inches across. To

be exact, the cross-stroke of the T is  $16\frac{1}{2}$  by  $8\frac{1}{2}$  inches, and the down-stroke 11 by  $7\frac{1}{4}$  down to the place at which it begins to recede towards the lower edge of the capital. This down stroke of the T, by itself, is exactly the bracket or "console member" of the early capitals in Normandy and in England. I suppose it is out of this "console" that it arose. Possibly the *tau*-cross was valued as a symbol. Certainly in the east window of the Corona, overhead, the same

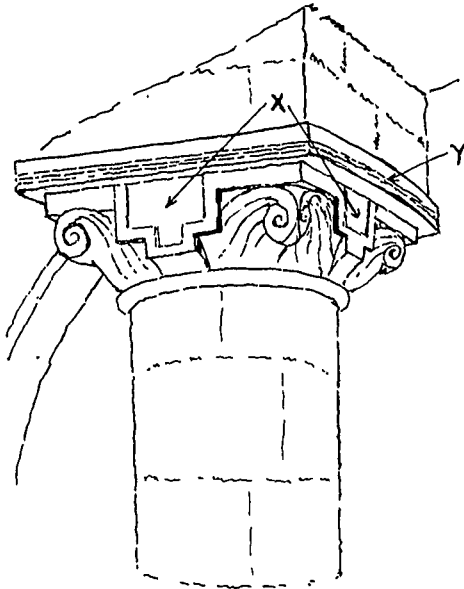


FIG. I. N.E. PILLAR ("JACHIN") FROM SOUTH-EAST showing *Tau*-crosses (X) and Curved Abacus (Y).

*tau* may be seen being marked by the Israelites with blood of the Passover lamb on the lintel of their door. That is an early thirteenth century picture. It was used as one of four types which were arranged round the Crucifixion-panel.

In the St. John's Chapel in the Tower of London there are twelve pillars and two half-pillars (or responds). All but three of these have capitals with *tau*-crosses. Two have cushion capitals. I suppose this is English. Only one of the complete capitals has volutes as well as *tau*-crosses.

This one capital is unlike all its fellows and has a typical Norman design: volutes at the four corners, and a frill or collar of plain leaves like hart's tongue ferns—it is the far-away reminiscence of Classical Corinthian. But its *tau*-cross differs from the work I have seen in Normandy. Gundulf has crossed his "T." The *tau* in Gundulf's Tower Chapel and here in the Canterbury undercroft seems to have been a departure from the design so common (*e.g.*) at Caen. There the middle of the face of the capital has what the French call a "console" or bracket. But here the "bracket" has extended (as it were) arms, and become a "*tau*." The "console" but not the "*tau*" is found on the oldest capitals of the Abbey of the Conqueror at Caen, St. Stephen's, and on all the capitals of the nave in the Trinity Church, Queen Matilda's abbey, which has been supposed to be Gundulf's work.

The starting point for any consideration of "Jachin" and "Boaz" will be the fact that Gundulf used the *tau* in the Tower of London. That would be about 1080. My suggestion is that Ernulf (not Lanfranc) used it in our Cathedral. His date as Prior is 1096-1107. We have two capitals here—and, I think, a third—to compare with Gundulf's work. In the White Tower at London, on one capital—and on one only, I think, but I cannot be sure about the half capitals on the responds—Gundulf combines the "*tau*" with the volutes. In his other (*unvolute*d) *tau*-cross capitals, he handles the change by which he arrives from the round of the column to the square of the abacus, by cutting away the four corners at the bottom of his capital, and carving the triangular faces at each corner which result into a kind of foliage that is not wholly unlike the foliage (if you may call it that) on "Jachin" and "Boaz", but rougher. This "foliage" (but it scarcely deserves the name) is found on eight of Gundulf's fourteen capitals and half-capitals; the volutes on three others; the *tau*-cross on eleven. From what is left of them it would appear that the "Ernulf" capitals were uniform; as though the workman had passed the experimental stage and had decided upon a uniform design.

Again, the pillars of Gundulf are built in courses of ashlar work, in ten courses or so, each of eight or nine stones. The pillar ("Jachin"), which I counted, was built in courses of two, three and in one case four stones. So far as this weighs at all, it suggests a later date for our undercroft pillars and capitals.

But the evidence in the undercroft for a later date than Lanfranc's lies in the abacuses. These are straight-sided on three sides, but bowed or curved on the fourth. "Jachin's" abacus ("Jachin" stands towards the north) has its curve on the east side and can be plainly seen to be bent like a bow, its curve corresponding with the curve of the passage. On

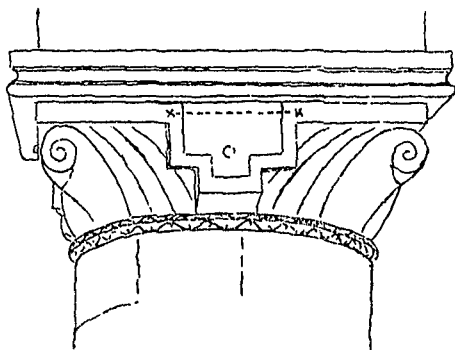


FIG. II. S.E. PILLAR ("BOAZ").

the south "Boaz" has the curved side of the abacus on the inner face towards the wall of the passage. The abacus has been placed with its curve towards the west and it is half hidden in the groin vault of the undercroft. These curves are suggestive of the pillars having once stood in an ambulatory, the bending or curved side facing outwards and corresponding with the bend of the ambulatory. Gundulf has not made this curve in the abacus of the capitals of his ambulatory in St. John's Chapel. Perhaps it was a later refinement so to bend the outline of the abacus on the outer side towards the passage. In any case if these abacuses ever stood in an ambulatory they must be Ernulf's and not Lanfranc's. For the foundations of the eastern apses of Lanfranc's choir-aisles have been uncovered and it could be seen that

Lanfranc's choir aisle stopped short and did not run round his choir. Lanfranc had no ambulatory.

A third "Ernulf" capital (as I said) can be seen, still, where William of Sens has made use of it as part of his support for his pillar No. VI. The two stones can be seen there, used, together with another stone, to make a capital for a block of masonry which ends in a half-octagon. This gives the capital a nondescript shape (Figs. III and IV). And it is now a puzzling combination of late eleventh century and 1170

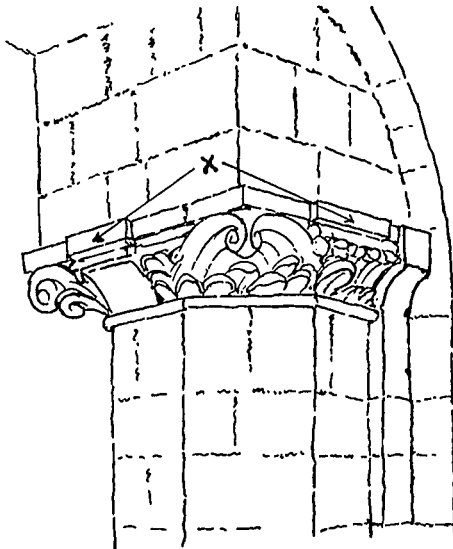


FIG. III. WESTERN COLUMN (FROM SOUTH-WEST)  
showing Vestiges of *Tau*-crosses (X) subsequently carved  
into foliage forms.

carving. There are traces of Ernulf's "tulip" foliage and of his old Normandy volutes. But the two stones of Ernulf's capital have been cut into new shapes and in 1170-something the men have carved a foliage which trembles on the verge of being Early English: it has leaves and buds which are wholly different from the Ernulf work. Three sides of the old capital remain and the position in each of them of the *tau*-cross can be recognized. There are traces of a projecting ledge, measuring in each case the required  $16\frac{1}{2}$  inches, which

has been more or less cut away, but has not quite disappeared. Besides these three capitals in the undercroft, in the choir above two respond-capitals, at the west end of the choir, may be of Ernulf's stone. The responds on which they rest are built of courses which are generally of two stones. And the "Ernulf" form can be detected, perhaps, under the disguise of 1175 work in the capitals. Traces of the *tau*-cross suggest themselves perhaps. All the pillars of the choir, now, are built of whole drums and the capitals are of single stones. William of Sens used entirely new stone it seems. He retained the old girth of 126 inches and heightened the pillars

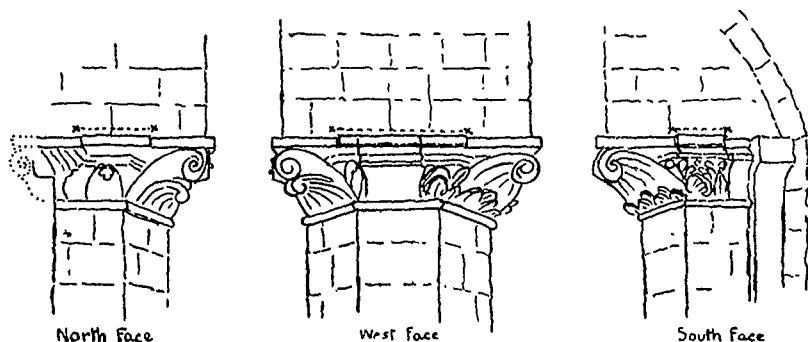


FIG. IV. WESTERN COLUMN.

11 feet. In the north aisle of the choir Professor Willis has traced and distinguished Ernulf's and William of Sens's work; the later work being built with the larger stones. In the very bays of which Willis makes a diagram illustrating this survival of Ernulf masonry, there survive four capitals different in character from the neighbouring 1175, 6, 7 work. It is to be noted that these Ernulf capitals use the same volute as is found on the larger capitals in the undercroft. These four small capitals have neither "console" nor "*tau*."

It may seem hazardous to claim to distinguish between the work of Lanfranc (finished 1077) and the work of Ernulf whose date is 1096 onwards. But if "Jachin" and "Boaz" are Ernulf's, they have, after all, made but a short journey from the ambulatory of Ernulf's choir, "Conrad's glorious

choir," above, down into the ambulatory of the undercroft immediately underneath. One might be anxious to claim for stones that they were of William the Conqueror's reign. But if these are only of Henry I's reign they have still had their share of history. During the seventy years or so that they lived in the upper air they will have looked down westward on the High Altar and seen Anselm return after his long and complicated quarrel, and (*e.g.*) consecrate William Giffard to be Bishop of Winchester, 1107, on Anselm's terms and the Pope's, not on the terms of William the Red or Henry—or, in 1162, they looked down eastwards into the old Trinity Chapel and saw Thomas Becket go in to say his first Mass. Below them, eight years later, lay the holy body of Saint Thomas all night long after the evening of his martyrdom. A reddened stone or two of them still seems to suggest that it was touched by the flames of 1174. Once there were twenty-six of them. Here are two (or I'll say, three) of the twenty-six capitals, still helping to lift up other pillars to stand where their's stood more than 750 years ago, obscurer now than once they were, but handing on the tradition which connects itself with the Black Prince's tomb in the Chapel of St. Thomas overhead, which they never saw: the tradition of proud service, *Ich dien*. Once they were eminent in Conrad's glorious choir. But the yet more glorious choir of William of Sens depends to-day on their unseen support.