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The 'Prentice's Bracket' at Gloucester Cathedral

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The 14th-century 'Prentice's bracket' in the south transept of Gloucester cathedral has usually been thought to represent the fatal plunge of a young mason, watched by an older colleague. The implicit parallel is with Icarus and Daedalus, which suggests a moral lesson about the risks of Pride for artisans who worked at dangerous heights. However, this reading of the imagery may not be correct. In light of what is actually shown — the younger man is clearly attached to a vault — it seems more likely to represent a rescue through supernatural intervention. Numerous parallels for such rescues exist in medieval sources, particularly in the praise literature dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

INDUSTRIAL accidents on Gothic worksites do not for the most part find their way into the historical record. William of Sens's fall from the scaffolding of Canterbury cathedral is the most celebrated, and it allowed the Canterbury chronicler Gervase to make a moral point, albeit cryptically, about the virtue or otherwise of a celebrated artist. William had fallen either because the 'vengeance of God or spite of the Devil'.[1] I mention William of Sens at the outset because memory of his fall may have persisted in the minds of Canterbury masons for generations; with his exception, none of the great architects of the time provably met the same fate. Gervase belonged to a generation of monks and clerics given to moralisation about Pride and the arts, using classical language and ideas to frame it. The analogy to fallen pride drawn with Dedalus and Icarus in mind is well rehearsed enough. Pliny (*Natural History*, Book XXXV, xxxvi.71) calls Parrhasius 'fecundus artifex sed quo nemo insolentius usus sit Gloria artis', a prolific artist, but one who enjoyed the glory of his art with unparalleled arrogance, an idea probably echoed in Matthew Paris's condemnation of the mason Hugh of Goldclif as 'vir quidem fallax et falsidicus sed artifex praeelectus', a deceitful man and a liar, but a pre-eminent craftsman.[2] This is not the place to dilate on this theme. Manifestly the fall of prideful art was of interest to ancient Romans as much as to Christians — witness folio 17 of the French-made Bedford Hours in (London, British Library MS Additional 18850), which delights in showing a mason plunging from the scaffolding right at the top of Tower of Babel, itself one of the great negative examples of the time.[3] And as, from the early 14th century especially, vaults became a zone of the ludic, as in the cloister bays at Norwich cathedral erected under Bishop Salmon (1299–1325) — consider the little figures clinging naughtily to ribs near the slype doorway in the east walk — the perils of building were elided with a sort of black 'marginal' humour. In this mindset the switch from negative to positive could happen instantly: an unexpected rescue from a tumble could also be seen as positively miraculous.

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The south transept of what is now Gloucester cathedral possesses an image of this sort. The sculptures of the transept generally have tended to escape comment, though they are worth further study.[4] On the transept's east wall, projecting from the stone panelling next to the entrances to the crypt and ambulatory, is an L-shaped stone bracket, the base of the L pointing southwards, with above it a small crenellated (oak?) canopy like a very abbreviated tester (Fig. 1). The bracket (Fig. 2) is supported on a corbel, and its sides are decorated with blind tracery and merlon cresting a little like that on the church's exterior. The top of the bracket has a series of irregularly placed dowel holes (Fig. 3). On its underside is an expanse of rib vaulting similar to the lierne vault of the transept itself. Against the vaulting is spread-eagled the form of a beardless male in a tunic, a youth, his right hand attached palm-side up to the vault web, his left gripping a rib, the knees slightly drawn in (Fig. 4). His form is turned at about 45 degrees to the angle of the L. Below him on the front face of the corbel is a seated bearded male, also in a tunic with a fat belt and toolbag into which is tucked a wooden mallet (Fig. 5). He places his right hand on his knee and raises his left hand to his head in a gesture of shock or distress, or wonder.

The common presumption about these images is that they show a master mason witnessing the fall to his death from the vaulting of a younger male colleague, an apprentice or a kinsman. Welander thinks the young man is not falling but has already fallen, 'lying on an exact miniature of the transept vault'.[5] By this reading, the bracket is a memorial to the untimely death of a young mason, to whose trade the L-shaped, set-square-like bracket is a witty compliment.[6]

It is not clear to the present writer that this 'Dedalan' reading of the bracket is correct. One or two things are certain: the bracket sustained an image or more probably images; there is a clear age-difference between the protagonists; the older man is a mason; and some sort of accident is involved. The pictorial language of the figures needs to be seen in the context of the other small sculpted representations in the transept, contained as they are within the grids of tracery. We note that on the vault of the choir installed around mid-century, figures of angels look down upon us with their backs adhering to the ribs and vault surfaces, not using their hands gingerly to support themselves.[7] Similar small male figures in tunics and habits are set nonchalantly against the complex door-heads to the crypt and ambulatory nearby; one, over the ambulatory door on to the underside of the door-head, steadies himself by the palm of his hand. None of these is falling.

Our bracket has to be assessed by the conventions generally used in medieval representation for the act of falling disastrously. When someone falls in an act of Christian-moral retribution or just in an accident, the most common form by far is of a figure propelled headlong downwards with the feet kicking up above and behind. Falling is a consequence of moral 'inversion'. Instances are legion — Pride falls from his horse in this way, as in the cloister at Norwich. There is a good example in the scene of the Fall of the Rebel Angels in the early 13th-century Lothian Bible.[8] At St Peter's abbey in Gloucester, we might expect interest in the downfall of the famed example of simony, Simon Magus, before St Peter: Simon was shown falling headlong in the paintings in John VII's oratory at Old St Peter's as recorded by Grimaldi.[9] At Peterborough abbey, a man, probably Simon but possibly Nero, falls head-first into the hands of demons on the 13th-century sculpted base of the column of the west portal.[10]

FIG. 1. Gloucester cathedral: south transept east wall showing position of bracket to right
Paul Binski

FIG. 2. Gloucester cathedral: south transept, bracket
Paul Binski

But the image we encounter on the Gloucester bracket is not that of a man falling headlong, but pinned angel-like against the vault by his back and buttocks. It therefore seems too grandiose to think of him as an Icarus figure. His plight is not attractive, but nor is it obviously punitive or lethal. He is in effect stuck to the vault, not plunging from it.

To my mind the image, on the contrary, might more probably commemorate a wondrous or even miraculous survival. Miraculous rescues of imperilled craftsmen working at a great height are known if not common, and normally the intercession is

FIG. 3. Gloucester cathedral: south transept, top surface of bracket
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by the Virgin Mary. Excellent instances are found in the prodigiously illustrated songs of praise to the Virgin Mary, *Las Cantigas*, produced in Castile for Alphonso X (d. 1284), the half-brother of Eleanor of Castile. One well-known one, a common *exemplum* of the time and shown in the Escorial manuscript of the *Cantigas* (Madrid, Escorial MS T.1.1, fol. 109r), tells the story of a painter executing a beautiful image of the Virgin and an equally hideous one of the devil, who in revenge struck down the painter's scaffolding while he was still on it (Fig. 6). The painter, with Mary's help, remains stuck by his back to the vault and blithely carries on his work. The image is completed and the people give thanks to the Virgin Mary in the form of her seated image as the Madonna on an altar.[11] The painter's head-up hovering position is consistent with that of the mason on the Gloucester bracket. There were other options for 'fall' miracles. The Florence manuscript of the *Cantigas* shows other accidents at folios 80 and 88; in one a boy topples head-first but is caught by the Virgin and shown upright; on folio 88 a youth is left hanging by his fingers from the top of a wall but is rescued by the angels with the Virgin following; they prop up his feet.[12] The Sienese panel of Beato Agostino Novello by Simone Martini, perhaps of the 1320s, shows the miraculous rescue of a child falling from a balcony with the saint swooping in to save it: the image creates tension by placing the child near the ground but not hitting it, the happy outcome still being obvious.[13]

The evidence is more consistent with the idea that the Gloucester figures depict some sort of accident prevented against the odds, or even some miraculous or near-miraculous intervention. One reason for supposing so is that a work such as the bracket makes more sense as the marker of a positive than a negative outcome. Tombs or memorials of workmen are scarcely known before 1350, the exceptions being incised slabs commemorating architects at Crowland and Lincoln or trade memorials, such as the brass of Nicholas d'Aumberdene, a fishmonger, at Taplow in Buckinghamshire (*c.* 1350) which are not common.[14] The rarity of recorded falls of this sort suggests that a lethal accident suffered by a junior member of a workforce, while regrettable, would have been regarded as acceptable collateral by the standards of the day. But a fall prevented miraculously, and from a great height as is implied here,

FIG. 4. Gloucester cathedral: south transept, falling apprentice
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might be a sign worthy of commemoration. The south transept, now attributed to Thomas of Canterbury (fl. until 1335) was being constructed from *c.* 1331 and the vaults were probably nearing completion in the second half of the decade, which suggests the time at which this accident occurred.[15] The bracket itself must post-date this episode and general phase, but not by much. If this is true, the possibility opens that the bracket was intended to be an *ex-voto*, presumably supplied by the master in charge, in thanks for a rescue and not in mourning of a death.

The general form and some details of the bracket favour this interpretation. The L-shape might be a witty reference to a standard item of masons' tackle, but it is also

FIG. 5. Gloucester cathedral: south transept, master mason witness
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possible that it was the practical solution to the immediate context and intention of the object. The aim was presumably to sustain the image of a standing saint with either lights or, more probably, images in front giving thanks. This is demonstrable from the position of the tester, and the erratic dowel holes on the top surface: two at the rear, probably to engage the base of the standing figure, and two sets of two towards the front edge, probably to engage two smaller figures kneeling in prayer, namely the master and his rescued junior partner (Fig. 3). The southward turn clears the bracket from the nearby door-head. Whoever thought all this through wanted this object not to interfere with the lines of the masonry, while also thinking pictorially.

A hypothetical grouping, as suggested, would involve the master mason, the youth and a saint, presumably if not certainly the Virgin Mary, often shown standing in this period.[16] St Barbara, a rescuer from sudden death, is also a possibility, but her cult was not common in England; another absolutely unverifiable option is that what was commemorated was a 'miracle' of Edward II himself, given the tradition that the transept was funded by proceedings from his cult; but the content of the compilation of his miracles delivered to the Pope in 1395 has never been established.[17] Whatever the truth, the core narrative of the bracket's sculptures would be like that of the *Cantigas*, showing the miracle and then a thanksgiving. No independent evidence exists to affirm or deny this interpretation. A romantic might persist in thinking that the bracket commemorates a death, since Thomas of Canterbury appears not to be documented after 1335. But the visual evidence does not support this idea and there is no evidence that Thomas or any other architect was killed in a fall at Gloucester. On the other hand, to the Kentish-influenced masons working on the transept, heirs to the tradition of architectural excellence begun at Canterbury by none other than William of Sens, an interest in a fall averted, perhaps propitiously, might not be so very surprising. Well might they have given thanks, for here the virtue of the mason has gained its reward.

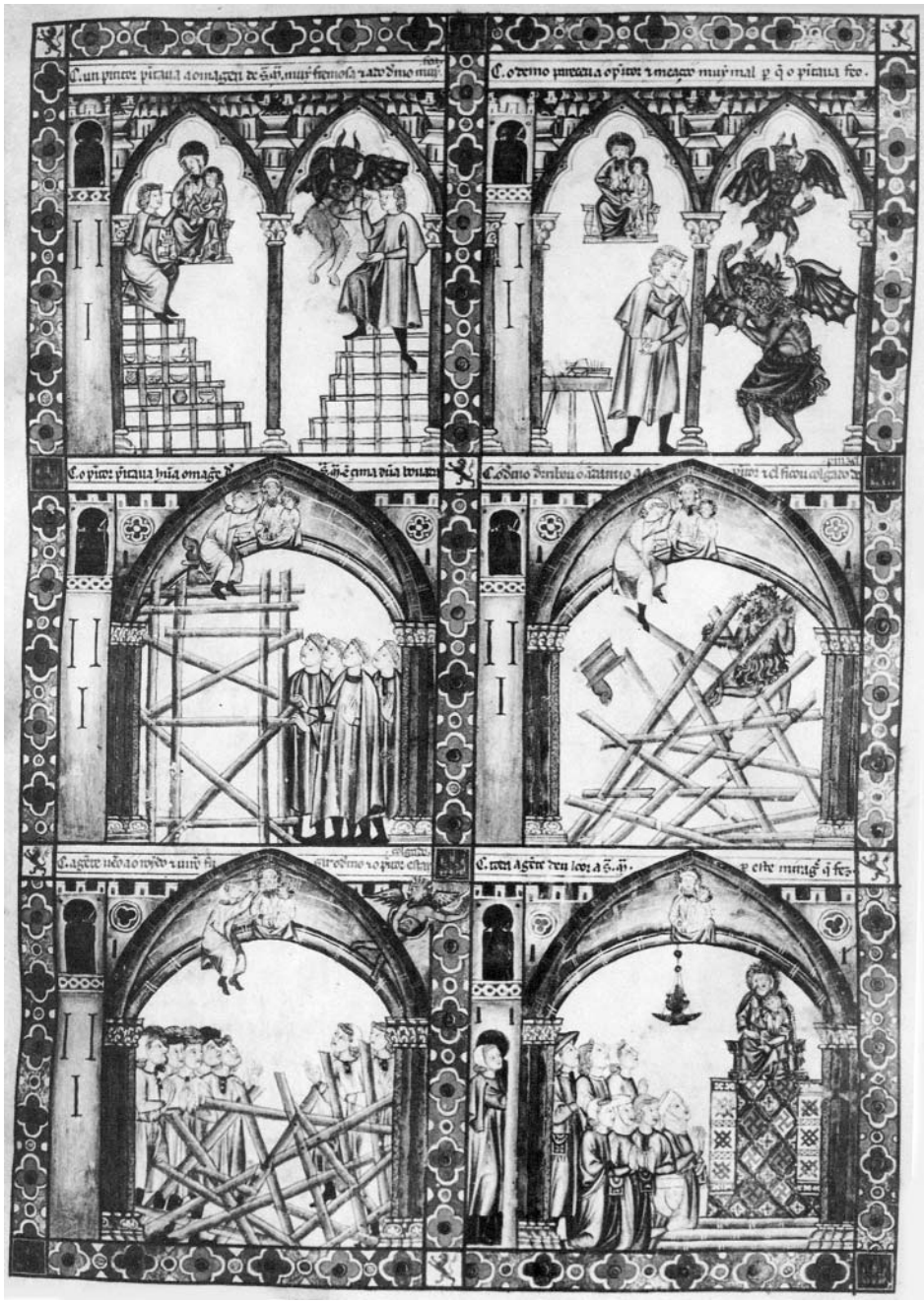

FIG. 6. *Las Cantigas*, miracle of painter saved from falling (Madrid, Escorial MS T.1.1, fol. 109)

After J. Guerrero Lovillo, Las Cántigas: estudio arqueológico de sus miniaturas (Madrid 1949)

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NOTES

1. *Historical Works of Gervase of Canterbury*, ed. W. Stubbs, 2 vols, Rolls Series 73 (London 1879–80), I, 20: 'In solum magistrum vel Dei vindicta vel diaboli desaevit invidia'; P. Binski, *Becket's Crown: Art and Imagination in Gothic England 1170–1300* (New Haven and London 2004), 50.

2. Pliny, *Natural History Books XXXIII–XXXV*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge MA and London 1952), 314–15; for Hugh of Goldclif, X. Muratova, 'Vir quidem fallax et falisidicus, sed artifex praeelectus. Remarques sur l'image sociale et littéraire de l'artiste au moyen age', in *Artistes, Artisans et production artistique au Moyen Age*, ed. X. Barral I Altet, 3 vols (Paris 1986–90), I, 53–72; Binski, *Becket's Crown* (as n. 1), 46–51. Francis Bacon (drawing on Fulgentius?) later calls Dedalus 'vir ingeniosissimus sed execrabilis': *De sapientia veterum liber* (London 1609), sec. 19, at sigs. D10r–11v.

3. Conveniently illustrated in N. Coldstream, *Medieval Craftsmen: Masons and Sculptors* (London 1991), fig. 6.

4. For instance, the remarkable etiolated figure, one of two, which peers over and clutches the stone stall-end by the mysterious little door in the south wall, resembles in its stance the angels found sustaining the thrones of Cimabue's *Maestà* paintings. Compare L. Bellosi, *Cimabue* (New York 1998), pls at 105, 230, 248.

5. D. Welander, *The History, Art and Architecture of Gloucester Cathedral* (Stroud 1991), 158. See also D. Verey and D. Welander, *Gloucester Cathedral* (Gloucester 1979), 57 and pl. XXX.

6. I am not sure of the origins of this idea, but it appears in H. J. L. J. Massé, *The Cathedral Church of Gloucester* (London 1898), 158, saying that it 'resembles a mason's square supporting an apprentice [. . .] probably intended to carry an image with a pair of lights and also to serve as a memorial of the workmen'. The idea recurs in N. Pevsner, *The Cathedrals of England: Midland, Eastern and Northern England*, ed. P. Metcalf (Harmondsworth 1985), 146.

7. Welander (as n. 4), 185–86 for illustrations.

8. N. J. Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts I, 1190–1250*, A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles 4.1 (London 1982), no. 32, fig. 108.

9. Vatican, Bibliotheca Apostolica, Cod. Barb. Lat. 2733, fol. 89.

10. G. Henderson, 'The Damnation of Nero, and Related Themes', in *The Vanishing Past. Studies of Medieval Art, Liturgy and Metrology presented to Christopher Hohler*, ed. A. Borg and A. Martindale, BAR International Series 111 (Oxford 1981), 39–51.

11. See F. C. Tubach, *Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales*, FF Communications, 86/204 (Helsinki 1969), 277 (no. 3573). For the Escorial manuscript, see J. Guerrero Lovillo, *Las Cántigas: estudio arqueológico de sus miniaturas* (Madrid 1949).

12. See *Cantigas de Santa Maria: edición facsimil del códice B.R.20 de la Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale de Florencia*, 2 vols, Coleccio n Co dices Arti sticos 10 (Madrid 1989–91), I.

13. A. Martindale, *Simone Martini: Complete Edition* (Oxford 1988), no. 41, fig. 76.

14. F. A. Greenhill, *Incised Effigial Slabs*, 2 vols (London 1976), I, 202 fig. 23; II, 13 (Crowland abbey, William de Wermington with square and compasses), 14 (Lincoln cathedral, cloister, slab of Richard of Gainsborough, with square, of the mid-14th century); for the brass of Nicholas the fishmonger, see *The Earliest English Brasses: Patronage, Style and Workshops 1270–1350*, ed. J. Coales (London 1987), fig. 117.

15. For a general discussion of Gloucester at this time, see J. M. Luxford, *The Art and Architecture of the English Benedictine Monasteries, 1300–1540: A Patronage History* (Woodbridge 2005), 157–62, esp. 159; also Welander 1991 (as n. 4), 150–60; for the dating, J. H. Harvey, 'The Origin of the Perpendicular Style', in *Studies in Building History*, ed. E. M. Jope (London 1961), 134–65, at 135–36; for the attribution to Thomas of Canterbury, see C. Wilson, *The Gothic Cathedral* (London 1990), 204–06; idem, 'Thomas Canterbury (fl. 1323–1335)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (see <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37763/42215?docPos=2> [accessed 1 June 2014]).

16. For her image at this time, see N. J. Morgan, 'Texts and Images of Marian Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England', in *England in the Fourteenth Century*, ed. N. Rogers, Harlaxton Medieval Studies 3 (Stamford 1993), 34–57.

17. Welander 1991 (as n. 4), 158, for St Barbara. For the miracles of Edward II, see S. Phillips, *Edward II* (New Haven and London 2010), 604–05.