Symbols of Power and Authority:

The Iconography of Late Thirteenth-Century Chapter Houses

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In the context of his major study of Westminster Abbey, Paul Binski draws attention to the ways in which imagery, particularly Royal hagiography, may have served to help formulate and stabilise thirteenth century concepts of authority.[1] To complement his analysis of the Abbey, he summarises the wider historical processes which led to the creation of separate meeting spaces for chapter assembly, how these spaces came to take over from the choir any practices which were not specifically liturgical, and how their iconographic schemes are notably diverse.[2] Constructed in the second half of the thirteenth century, the Chapter House at Westminster was the first of a series which includes similar structures at Salisbury and York. If Binski's analysis of the function of imagery during this period is correct, this series offers scope for a comparative study of one aspect of the iconography of power and authority within a common setting.

Concentrating primarily on the iconographic content of the York Chapter House, this essay seeks to compare and contrast wherever possible those elements present with similar manifestations at Westminster and Salisbury. It will seek to question whether the surviving content of the respective schemes can be used to support the concept of a process of evolution in the understanding of the relationship between authority, imagery and setting in the later thirteenth century.

Despite a basic scarcity of documentary evidence, the ravages of time, reformation and restoration, sufficient elements of the original iconographic schemes survive to make such analysis viable. The basic similarity which each structure bears to the other two

suggest that the respective designers and commissioners were aware of the work and achievement of their predecessors. A starting point for this analysis has been suggested by Dawton, who has postulated that each of the Chapter Houses was designed and given an overall iconographic scheme by common reference to a single model.[3] Although Dawton's hypothesis of the Chapter Houses as loci of Maryan devotion is difficult to sustain, it does suggest one view of the evolution of their design. If each is intended to refer to a single model, differences in the content of each scheme may stem from a desire to create increasingly magnificent imitations of that model.

An alternative approach to the analysis depends on reference to intended usage rather than any external model or type. In terms of the creation of a Chapter House, visual splendour must be accompanied by a measure of basic functionality. Any change in the elements of design and iconography must have been seen as enhancements to this basic functionality. Given that the structures are different, a process of development or evolution in the understanding of the functionality and purpose of the finished structures may be discernible.

There are, therefore, two questions which may be applied to each element of change or continuity in the iconographic schemes. First, do they create an impression of increasing splendour, suggesting merely physical embellishment. Second do they suggest an increasing functionality signalling a process of conceptual enlargement. Before applying these questions to the respective schemes, it is important to place the building campaigns within a basic historic context.

This series of Chapter Houses was conceived and constructed against a general background of experimentation in the form and meaning of rule and government pursued

throughout the thirteenth century. Each of the structures was used by different authority groups, both church and lay, at various times. Evidence suggests that work began at Westminster as early as 1246, and was sufficiently progressed by 1249 for a wooden lectern to be commissioned from John of St. Omer. The Chronicler Mathew Paris described the structure as a work 'beyond compare' by 1253, and by 1259 it appears that the building was complete and in full use.[4]

The dating of the Salisbury Chapter House is less firmly established. Coins uncovered in the foundations of the building indicate a date of around 1280, although statuary within the cathedral has been used to suggest an earlier date of completion of around 1260.[5] Brown notes that tree ring dating of the Chapter House roof timbers seems to accord with a date of completion around 1266.[6]

Analysis of masons marks within the Minster at York suggests that the construction of the Chapter House and Vestibule should be located between the completion of the transepts c1255 and commencement of the reconstruction of the nave in c1291. By 1286, it was feasible for Archbishop John le Romeyn to contemplate holding a visitation in the Chapter House, and in 1296 it was used as a venue for a meeting of the parliament.[7]

Rough and imprecise as it is, this broad chronology of construction serves to locate the three building campaigns within an important period of political development for England as a whole. Spanning the reigns of Henry III and Edward I, the period is notable for two themes. Firstly the experimentation with the exercise of power, specifically royal power, most specifically the relationship between that power and the conciliar structures which had exercised authority during the minority of Henry. Secondly, the attempt by Edward I to extend his Royal authority throughout England, Scotland and Wales, notable

particularly as Edward made York an important base for his campaigns against the Scots.

Each of the Chapter Houses are very specific types of space. They stand in very particular relationship to the larger structures of which they form part, and in this respect the three share certain common elements. Each is designed to be approached primarily through other elements of space. At Westminster and Salisbury, the Chapter House stands off the cloister. At York, the Chapter House is approached by passing through the intimidating vastness of the North Transept and beneath the Five Sisters window. The inner space of each Chapter House is then further 'protected' by an intervening vestibule. In practical terms, those approaching the Chapter Houses would be required to pass through successive areas before arriving in the chamber itself. The respective chambers must be seen therefore as occupying a terminal position at the end of a carefully controlled physical movement though time, space and symbology. Chapter Houses are not therefore simply spaces to be in, they are spaces to process to, to be seen proceeding to, and no less significantly perhaps, spaces to be kept waiting outside. Although this basic continuity of location within a larger structure renders Dawton's suggestion of the self-contained Church over the Virgin's tomb as the reference model harder to sustain, it does not rule out the possibility of reference to some other model.

Physically, each of the three chambers share a diameter of roughly fifty nine feet, and a common octagonal floor plan with buttresses at the corners. The York chamber has the innovation of abandoning a central supporting column. Large tracery windows occupy the bulk of the available wall space in each face of Westminster and Salisbury. Each has a broadly similar scheme of four lights arranged in pairs within paired arches, with a quatrefoil below a multi lobed figure. The introduction of a blind window tracery above

the entrance to the York chamber represents a departure from this general pattern which seems to have been necessitated by the inclusion of a chamber above the entrance vestibule. The window tracery at York is more complex, with the seven available walls each housing five-light windows, two exterior paired lights being separated by a single pointed light, all positioned beneath three multi lobed figures. The entrance to each of the chambers consists of a single doorway with a pair of arches, plain at Salisbury, cusped at York and Westminster, with a central trumeau. The function of the buildings, that of seating an assembly, is served by the provision in each of the chambers of a wall arcade. At Westminster and Salisbury, these arcades are broadly similar; a series of arches applied in relief to the flat supporting wall, with a simple bench in front. The East wall arcade at Westminster (the area reserved for the abbot, prior and senior monks) stands proud, adding some depth to the design while maintaining the overall plan of five arches per arcade. This pattern is repeated and elaborated at Salisbury, with seven cusped arches per arcade, and the addition of a series of narrative relief sculpture panels in the spandrels. This simple arcade and bench form is seen in the vestibule at York, but within the chamber a recessed sedilia, with decorated rib-vaulted canopies on piers of purbeck marble projecting into the chamber, takes the place of the simple bench.

What then can be said in general about these structures ? Clearly shape is of significance given the adherence to the same basic floor plan and dimension. This suggests a degree of perceived optimisation which may refer either to a common model or to functionality. The adoption of a design dispensing with the need for a central supporting column at York emphasises the importance of openness. Simply making the chamber larger would not materially enhance its functionality, while removing the central pillar did.

That the design of the chamber at York was changed mid-way through to incorporate this innovation is evidenced by the anomalous form of the exterior buttresses and the somewhat elongated appearance of the windows themselves. (See Figure 1) The provision of greater height and more window space was therefore of importance in a way that the provision of more floor space was not.
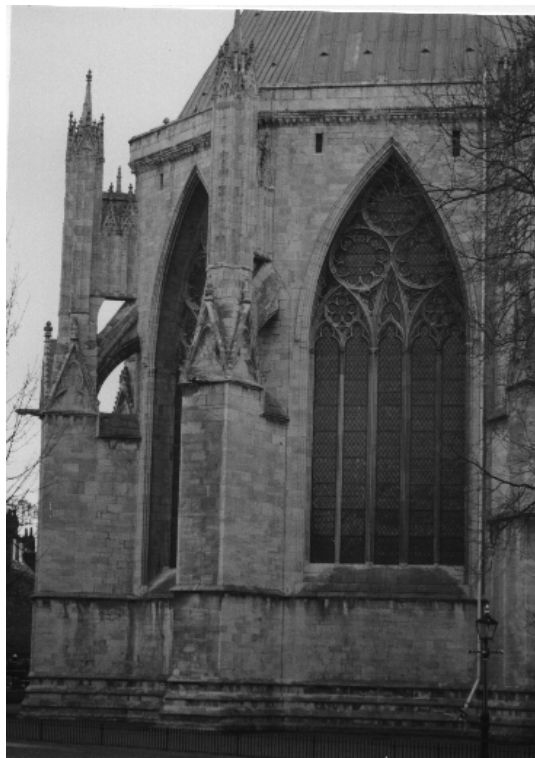
Figure 1.*Chapter House exterior showing window tracery and buttress detail.*

Chronological analysis of the major elements of the iconographic schemes is not straight forward. At Westminster, the painted scenes depicted in the arcade arches are a later addition dated to the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries. Although not a factor in the original conception of the chamber, their apocalyptic content does gives them a possible significance as a post-script to the process of evolution under consideration.   At Salisbury, the principal surviving iconographic element of the Chapter

House is provided by the series of relief carvings in the arcade spandrels. The fifty-five

scenes depicted are described by Blum as being of a largely narrative nature, depicting

episodes from the books of Genesis and Exodus, concluding with the granting of the

commandments. Blum concludes that the scheme can be dated with some accuracy to the

period of the construction of the Chapter House.[8] The York chamber has the benefit of

containing surviving elements of statuary and glazing, and although much of the original

painted decoration has been lost, it is sufficiently well recorded to facilitate the

consideration of the various elements as part of an overall scheme.[9]

In considering the detailed content of the glazing schemes, so little survives at

either Westminster or Salisbury, and that at York has been disturbed sufficiently, so as to

hinder true comparative study. Brown has reconstructed from records the basic plan of the

figural elements originally contained in the tracery glass of the Salisbury glazing scheme.

She has suggested that the scheme had a strong commemorative flavour, juxtaposing Kings

and Bishops, important figures from the Cathedral's past.[10]

It has been suggested by Marks that the glazing scheme at York reveals two

innovations which are pertinent to this analysis.[11] Firstly, the combination of grisaille

panels in alternation with narrative figure panels in the form of banding improves both the

illumination of the chamber and the legibility of the narrative panels themselves. The

provision of a greater expanse of glass in the heightened walls was not seemingly driven

therefore by a simple desire to include more, or larger, narrative or grisaille panels. The

implication therefore is that both the quantity and quality of light entering the chamber was

of importance to functionality. Secondly, Marks has observed that within the window

panels of the Vestibule are the earliest surviving examples of figures placed within simple

architectural canopies. This innovation may have been driven by the elongated design necessitated by the shape of the windows to be glazed, but the use of canopies of increasing complexity rapidly became a significant feature of later glazing schemes.

It seems clear however that the inclusion of armorial windows as elements of each scheme was of significance. This is not surprising given the contemporary evolution of the formal armorial role, and the depiction of arms within both ecclesiastical and temporal buildings should be seen as having several layers of meaning. Brown has suggested that the inclusion of a particular set of arms should be seen in the light of a commemoration of benefaction or as flattery of temporal lords whose continued financial support was essential to the ongoing success of the building schemes at York.[12] This notion effectively presents the armorial iconography as a relatively simple form of labelling; to use the most anachronistic language available, as a form of advertising for the power and wealth of the donor. The most frequently occurring arms in the Chapter House at York are after all those of the King, Edward I. This is fully reconcilable with a desire for increased ostentation.

This analysis may be accurate, but leads to a conclusion that the building of a Chapter House is a simple end in itself, and that the fact of the association of person with the magnificence of the structures was adequate justification to both donor and recipient for the inclusion of armorial symbols within the structure. This interpretation leads to an understanding of the created space in terms of a strictly utilitarian functionality, as a comfortable and convenient place to meet and transact the appropriate business. Once again, this may be a satisfactory motivation underlying the development of the apparent magnificence of the sequence of building programmes, but begs questions as to the relationship of the lay to the religious symbolism within the iconographic schemes at both

Salisbury and York. Chapter Houses were not primarily devotional spaces, yet

considerable care was seemingly taken to include religious imagery alongside the images

of secular authority represented by the armorial symbols. The diversity of the content of

the schemes makes it increasingly hard to sustain a view of these developments in terms of

reference to a single 'type model' as suggested by Dawton, or as simple ostentation. A

more subtle interpretation of the relationship between person, function, place and symbol

is perhaps required.

Some elements of the glazing scheme within the windows at York are self

explanatory in terms of their presence.[13] The construction of the scheme around a central

passion narrative is unsurprising, (although the inclusion of an image of Christ leading

souls out of hell mouth deserves note). To be anticipated also perhaps are the inclusion of

windows dedicated in turn to Saints Peter and Paul, both of whom stand in close relation to

the dedication and worship of the Minster. Similarly the dedication of windows to the

Blessed Virgin Mary and York's only resident saint, William, would require little

justification. Saint Catherine was a figure of wide devotion, and patron saint of learning.

The figures represented in the remaining window similarly represent 'popular'

contemporary interest, and significantly perhaps include St. Edmund, the archetypal

epitome of a 'good king'. Lost, but recorded, and perhaps representatives of a more

specifically Northern identity or devotion, were the painted figures in the tracery of the

blind window over the entrance. Norton suggests that these figures, an Archbishop flanked

by two Kings and two Bishops may represent saintly figures associated specifically with

the history of the Minster.[14] A degree of correlation may be observed between those

characters depicted in the overall scheme, and the personal devotional interests of many of

the contemporary canons, many of whose bequests founded chantries at the altars of the depicted saints.

Each element of the scheme of main light glazing and wall painting at York does therefore appear to stand alone in terms of the significance of the figures represented. In conjunction with the armorial symbols included in the *oculi* above the main lights, the overall effect is one of the close juxtaposition of contemporary secular wealth and power with exemplary devotional figures. Again it is appropriate to remember that none of the Chapter Houses in question is specifically dedicated to either public or private devotion, so alternative rationale behind this arrangement is required. One possible analysis which presents itself lies in the very juxtaposition of the symbols of secular and spiritual authority. The political background to the construction of these three structures as outlined above was one of a general exploration of the powers of monarchy and council; the individual and the corporate voices of authority. The effect of drawing religious narrative up into the windows is the creation of a closer visual relationship between the two symbologies. It is possible that a direct statement was being made regarding the relationship between spiritual and temporal authority.

Perhaps the most significant development present in the York Chapter house is the incorporation and decoration of the sedilia. The stalls richly decorated with natural foliage bear in addition a series of carved corbel heads, predominantly realistic human representations, both male and female, but with some mythical or allegorical figures represented as well. Figures are mounted in pairs, four per canopy, with a single larger figure mounted between each canopy. (See Figure 2)

Figure 2. Detail of the sedilia canopy showing carved corbel heads.

The meaning and purpose of these figures has been debated at length. Although subject to some damage during the civil war, it is clear that many of the heads are original and in situ. Aberth suggests that the sheer number of the figures, over 250 individual carvings, and their location just above eye level, make it likely that they were conceived as an integral part of the meaning and context of the sedilia.[15] Represented amongst the figures themselves are a mixture male and female figures, variously attired. Some are clearly of high status, bearing either knightly attire, veils, or crowns and coronets. Others are more simply clad in caps, hoods or wimples. Accompanying the human figures are a series of realistic representations of animals, including monkeys, dogs and boars. The third and most problematic group are the allegorical figures, which I take to include both representations of mythical beasts, and human figures whose posture and expression clearly indicates some particular meaning, most notably the 'tooth-ache' or 'ire' figures. There is possibly some connection between this series of allegorical figures and similar figures painted in the ceiling vault, recorded by Torre and discussed by Norton.[16]

It has been suggested that the set of figures represent simply an exuberance on the part of the original masons, and should be seen in the context of humorous additions tolerated by the commissioners of the structure, whimsical self portraits, or expressions of independence of the craftsman over his temporal lords. In the context of the structure of the Chapter house however, none of these explanations are fully satisfactory. One possible interpretation of the purpose of these figures within the scheme as a whole is suggested by a series which appear at the junctions of the south-west, south and south-east walls. These figures, which appear to be original and undamaged include two representations of figures clearly wrestling with each other, and three other single figure sculptures, two male and one female, in the process of emerging from the face of the wall, struggling to break free. These figures emerging to join their fellows, suggest reference to '*lapis vivus*', the living stone, of which St. Peter wrote in the first of his epistles. (See figure 3)

If this connection is to be made, it becomes tempting to place the whole iconographic scheme of the York Chapter House within the context of an exposition of the text of 1 Peter, especially the second and third verses. Within this epistle, St. Peter directs his readers to a consideration of the source, role and responsibility of authority, and the relationship between authority and the individual . At the very pinnacle of the wooden ceiling vault is seen the agnus dei, a 'lamb without blemish or defect', 'revealed in these last times for your sake' as illustrated in the passion window, where Christ is shown 'put to death in the body, but made alive in the spirit , through whom he also went and preached to the souls in prison'.[17] The other narrative windows depict in turn images of those who 'followed in his steps' and suffered for the sake of Christ.

Figure 3. *Lapis Vivus?*

The importance of the relationship between the individual Christian, and authority, the principal theme of 1 Peter:2, is a theme to which other elements of the York scheme may be linked. The role of the King as supreme authority, and his 'governors' as appointed representatives is given emphasis in the armorial symbols contained in windows seen high above any assembly. Members seated within their canopied stalls become themselves the 'living stones' of which a divinely ordered creation consists and is being continually rebuilt. In the corbel heads may be seen men and women, perhaps the husbands and wives who St. Peter identifies as representatives of authority within the household in 1 Peter:3. Perhaps his admonition not to trade insult for insult is the message conveyed by the 'tooth-ache' figures, goading their observers into unchristian response.

The occupants of the chamber at York no longer merely sat in the space, as did their counterparts at Westminster and Salisbury, they had become instead part of the structure itself. In a similar manner, some of the figures represented in the York windows were themselves becoming more closely linked with the built structures around them through their location within architectural canopies. This suggests an increasing emphasis on the symbolic importance of the wider structures.

The overall impression of entering the York Chapter House, past the trumeau virgin, the ultimate symbol of submission to the will of God, is therefore one of being progressively 'called out of darkness into his wonderful light'. That light, which the designers had taken such pains to enhance in both quantity and quality itself served to emphasise the importance of the function of authority within creation. An overall feeling of historical progress is suggested. In the painted ceiling vault, paired images of Synagogue and Ecclesia, Moses and John the Baptist, emphasise progression from Old Testament to New Testament authority; from Mosaic law to authority derived from the person and power of Christ.[18] Narrative and armorial lights retain their individual significance but are also incorporated within an overall exposition of the relationship between temporal and spiritual authority. Secular power it is emphasised, derives authority from the will of God in the person of Christ. Bishops and Kings are juxtaposed, reminding those who by the grace of God bear either the sword or the crosier that they do so within a divinely ordered creation and are obliged both to recognise and to shoulder their responsibility to exercise this authority.

The construction of a Chapter House at the end of the thirteenth century it appears was not simply a building project, it involved the creation of special space. If Amos

Rapoport is correct in his analysis of the relationship between activities and architecture, then any constructed environment is designed very specifically to enclose tightly certain types of desired and appropriate behaviour. Correspondingly, as the activities which it is intended will take place within the built structure evolve, they will in turn themselves influence the evolution of its design.[19] This analysis seems to fit the evolution of Chapter House design. Great care was taken to control the way in which that space was positioned in relation to the rest of the space around it, and care was taken over the selection of the imagery to be presented to those within its walls. This was after all as Camille has indicated, an age in which it was believed that an image could leave a physical impression on the beholder.[20] It was in the construction of the Chapter House at York that this belief culminated in the linking of image to person to structure in its most complete and optimistic form. The Old Testament themes of creation and exodus presented at Salisbury are replaced at York by a New Testament exposition of the relationship between temporal and spiritual authority. Emphasis on authority based upon absolute principles of law is replaced by a more Christocentric emphasis on the derivation of individual authority directly from the person and teachings of Christ. The practical effect is the creation of a space within which the concept of personal authority, underwritten by scripture, holds sway over authority based upon reference to absolute laws.

This scheme interestingly is then itself displaced. Westminster occupies the curious position of being the first in terms of basic construction, but the last to be given a major iconographic scheme in the shape of the fourteenth and fifteenth century wall paintings. These paintings of the apocalyptic vision of the last judgement may reflect a revision of the essentially optimistic view of the relationship between divine and personal human

authority given such magnificent expression in the York Chapter House, through an emphasis on the personal account which all will be required to give at the time of the last judgement. Elements of Apocalyptic iconography are not unique to the Westminster Chapter House, nor to the fifteenth century, the theme being identified by both Brown and Blum in the Salisbury tympanum.[21] The inclusion of iconography as the major element at Westminster does however suggest a re-appraisal of the relevance of the scheme to the activities and meaning of the chamber.

Bearing in mind Rapoport's analysis, it does appear valid to suggest that this series of Chapter Houses evidence a development of the association between authority and constructed space during the later thirteenth century, and a simultaneous development of the exposition of both the source and responsibility of that manifest authority. This suggests that Binski's analysis of the role played by Royal hagiography in the formulation and stabilisation of medieval authority could usefully be extended to incorporate the series of thirteenth century chapter houses, and the ways in which their construction may have reflected scriptural exegesis. Positioned as they were in liminal space, the boundary between sacred and secular spheres, chapter houses offered, and continue to offer, scope for the exploration of the scriptural relationship between the two spheres, between the meaning and manifestation of authority.

NOTES:

[1] Binski, P. *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets: Kingship and the Representation of Power 1200-1400* (Pub. for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press, New Haven and London. 1995). See p. 86, "The imagery of kingship at the abbey and palace".
[2] Binski, P. *Westminster Abbey,* p. 187.

[3] Dawton, N. "The York Chapter House: Notes on the Trumeau Virgin and the iconographic significance of the building" in H.Weston and D.Davies, (eds.) *Essays in Honour of John White* (1990).

[4] Binski, P. *Westminster Abbey,* pp. 15-16.

[5] Spring, R. *Salisbury Cathedral* (Unwin Hyman, 1987).

[6] Brown, S. *Sumptuous and Richly Adorn'd* (RCHM, 1999), p. 28.

[7] Brown, S. *Stained Glass at York Minster.* (SCALA, 1999).

[8] Blum, P.Z. "The Sculptures of the Salisbury Chapter House" in Keen, L. and Cocke, C. (eds.) *Medieval Art and Architecture at Salisbury Cathedra.* (British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions XVII, 1996).

[9] Norton, E.C. "The Medieval Paintings in the Chapter House" in *Friends of York Minster 67th Annual Report,* 1996, pp. 34-51.

[10] Brown, S. *Sumptuous and Richly Adorn'd*, p. 90.

[11] Marks, R. *Stained Glass in England During the Middle Ages* (Routledge, 1993).

[12] Brown, S. *Stained Glass at York Minster* (SCALA, 1999).

[13] Content of the glazing scheme taken from Toy, J. *The Windows of York Minster* (Dean and Chapter of York, 1985).

[14] Norton, E.C. "The Medieval Paintings in the Chapter House", p. 40.

[15] Aberth, J. "The Sculpture heads and figures inside the Chapter House of York Minster", *The Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, CXLII (1989), pp. 37-45.

[16] Norton, E.C. "The Medieval Paintings in the Chapter House", p. 46.

[17] Biblical quotations are taken from the NIV translation of the New Testament.

[18] Norton, E.C. "The Medieval Paintings in the Chapter House".

[19] Rapoport, A. "Systems of activities and systems of settings" in Kent, S. (ed.) *Domestic Architecture and the use of space* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[20] Camille, M. *Gothic Art: Visions and Revelations of the Medieval World* (The Everyman Art Library. Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1996).

[21] Brown, S. *Sumptuous and Richly Adorn'd,* p. 28.

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