

The Old Sarum Workshop

A column swallowing capital



The Old Sarum Workshop

A column swallowing capital



This rare capital with two heads is carved to appear as if the heads are swallowing the columns that would have been beneath it. The capital is composed of a large head facing forward and a smaller head, set at a forty-five-degree angle. Both heads have small, cat-like ears and bulbous oval eyes with drilled pupils. The eyes are topped by a series of incised lines that curve around the top and stretch out towards the back of the heads. A similar set of lines repeat under the eyes, forming a long moustache and revealing a set of teeth that would have wrapped around the top of the columns. The heads are surmounted by a heavy impost, decorated with a double chevron variation with round buttons. The size of the capital and its state of preservation suggests that this was probably on the interior of a church, possible near the crossing where shafts of varying sizes would have formed a large supporting pier or at a doorway in the cloister.

Stylistically, the capital is analogous to the sculptures that survive from Old Sarum and to those sculptures that are thought to be by the same workshop. Examples include the

England, Wiltshire

c. 1130 - 50

20 x 35 x 35 cm; limestone, a break on the left corner above the smaller head; surface wear typical of a stone sculpture of this age, traces of surviving polychromy

Provenance:

Professor Charles Reginald Dodwell, Pilkington Professor of History of Art and Director of Whitworth Gallery, Manchester University 1966-89; and thence by descent

Literature:

Brodie, Allan and David Algar. 'Architectural and Sculpted Stonework.' In *Salisbury and South Wiltshire Museum: Medieval Catalogue*. Salisbruy, 2012.

McNeill, John. *Old Sarum*. English Heritage Guidebooks, 2006.



Fig. 1

Head of a dog
St Mary, Codford, St
Mary, Wiltshire
Mid 12th century



Fig. 2
Corbel of a bearded
creature
England, Old Sarum
c. 1130

sculptures excavated from Old Sarum and those at St Mary in Codford, where a carved head of a creature, called a dog, survives with similarly carved eyes and whiskers (fig. 1 - 3). The bulbous oval eyes with drilled pupils, the linear whiskers and eyebrows, the beaded ornament decorating the stones from Old Sarum also survive on our sculpture (fig. 2 - 3). Further stylistic comparisons can be found with numerous churches in and around Wiltshire, such as the sculpture at Avington, Great Shefford, and Elkstone (fig. 5 - 6).



Fig. 3
Old Sarum Stones



Fig. 4
Old Sarum Stones

Some of the examples that survive locally also share a common iconography with this piece. The theme of the column swallower is not known in classical art but it appears in the margins of early medieval manuscripts, such as the Book of Kells, where satanic heads swallow (or spew out) arches, borders or foliage. By the early 12th century, column swallowers become a part of the repertoire of medieval marginalia, which blurs the lines between the sacred and the profane. In architecture, the column-swallower is extremely popular in France, with regions such as Aquitaine especially densely populated. In England, however, the column swallower is also favoured and can be found throughout the south. Notable examples exist in Barfreston, Elkstone and South Wootton (fig. 5 – 6).



Fig. 5
Column swallower
St Mary, Great
Shefford, Berkshire
12th century



Fig. 6
Font with column
swallowers
England, Wootton
12th century

