LOSSES OF ANGLO-SAXON ART IN THE MIDDLE AGES\textsuperscript{1}

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To some extent the study of classical art is also the study of classical archaeology, for much of the classical art that we know—whether it be sculptures like the Laocoön, or the wall-paintings of Herculaneum and Pompeii—had first to be recovered from the soil by archaeologists of various periods. To some degree Anglo-Saxon art and archaeology are also interconnected. This is particularly true of the early period and we would know nothing, for example, of the artistic treasures of Sutton Hoo had it not been for the energies and expertise of the archaeologist.

It is, however, with the later Anglo-Saxon period that I want to concern myself here—the period of the tenth and eleventh centuries. And, I would like to suggest that an investigation of Anglo-Saxon art in terms of literary archaeology would be fruitful. Instead of digging up pieces of works of art and trying to piece them together in an effort at reconstruction, I would suggest that by delving into the literary and historic sources we could learn from them a little more than the surviving remnants of art can tell us about the art of the period. This form of literary archaeology is, indeed, essential if we are to get a more rounded view of art in England in the tenth and eleventh centuries. For—apart from the illuminated manuscripts—only the tiniest fragments of the art of the period have survived to this day.

We shall, I fear, have to begin with the lugubrious topic of what losses of Anglo-Saxon art were sustained during the Middle Ages themselves, for only by so doing shall we understand the full

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extent of that art, and in this paper I shall try to discover the whys and wherefores for the disappearance of so much Anglo-Saxon art before the Reformation itself.

Anglo-Saxon art was, of course, subject to the normal hazards of its period. And in centuries when buildings were mostly of wood and were frequently huddled together, one of the chief was fire.

At Canterbury Cathedral, for example, there were no less than three fires in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. "It happened", said Eadmer in his description of the second fire of 1067,

that the city of Canterbury was set on fire by the carelessness of some individuals, and that the rising flames caught the mother church thereof. How can I tell it—the whole was consumed, and nearly all the monastic offices that appertained to it.... The exact nature and amount of the damage occasioned by that conflagration no man can tell. But its extent may be estimated from the fact that the devouring flames consumed nearly all that was there preserved most precious, whether in ornaments of gold, or silver, or of other materials, or in sacred and profane books. 1

An even more harrowing account is given by Gervase of the third conflagration of 1174 which itself had spread from a fire in local cottages:

The house of God, [he said], hitherto delightful as a paradise of pleasures, was now made a despicable heap of ashes reduced to a dreary wilderness and laid open to all the injuries of the weather. The people were astonished that the Almighty should suffer such things, and, maddened with excess of grief and perplexity, they tore their hair and beat the walls and pavement of the church with their hands and heads, blaspheming the Lord and His saints, the patrons of the church; and many, both of laity and monks, would rather have laid down their lives than that the church should have so miserably perished. For not only was the choir consumed in the fire, but also the infirmary, with the chapel of St. Mary, and several other offices in the court; moreover many ornaments and goods of the church were reduced to ashes. 2

Within less than a decade of the first quarter of the twelfth century the Anglo-Saxon chronicle records three disastrous fires at other important centres. On 4 August 1116 it says that "all the church of Peterborough was burnt and all the buildings except the chapter-house and the dormitory, and in addition most of the

1 Quoted by R. Willis, The Architectural History of Canterbury Cathedral (London, 1845), p. 9. 2 Ibid. p. 34.
town was burnt".\(^1\) On 8 March 1122 it tells us that "the borough of Gloucester was burnt down. While the monks were singing their mass ... the fire reached the upper part of the tower and all the monastery was burnt and all the treasures that were there except a few books and three mass vestments."\(^2\) Under the year 1123 we further read that on 19 May "nearly all the city of Lincoln was burnt down,\(^3\) and an immense number of people, men and women, were burnt to death and so much damage was done there that no one could describe it to another".

Harrowing accounts of catastrophic fires like these sear their way through the annals of the Middle Ages.

These terrifying fires, of course, respected nothing. They devoured everything in their path, whether of wood or stone or vellum or even metal: we know, for example, of a large Anglo-Saxon crucifix, presented by Cnut to Winchester and beautifully adorned with gold, silver and precious stones, which was destroyed by fire in 1141.\(^4\) However, the Anglo-Saxon arts faced other and even more serious hazards which, in the long lottery of history, they could only surmount with difficulty. This was because they were so often made of precious materials: a point which I must emphasize at the outset. When a great writer on the medieval arts like Theophilus discusses all the crafts which include wall- and manuscript-painting, the making of stained glass windows and the carving of ivory, he gives twice as much space to metalwork as to all the other arts put together.\(^5\) When a great abbot like Suger describes the art-treasures of Saint-Denis with loving attention, he is almost completely indifferent to the sculpture there which was then revolutionizing the tastes of Europe, his interest is continually arrested and held by the works of art in precious metals.\(^6\) When an Anglo-Saxon poem on the arts of man refers to the artist, it has not the painter or sculptor or carver

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\(^3\) Ibid. p. 190.

\(^4\) L-B 4758.


in mind but the goldsmith. When the English chroniclers speak of art, more often than not they are speaking of works in gold and silver. When, in the context of art, a quotation is made from the classics, that quotation is most frequently the phrase from Ovid that suggests that art should be precious both in material and in workmanship. The art that the Middle Ages relished was precious in both, and whilst precious workmanship faces enough risks from the eroding forces of time, precious metals encounter dangers that are almost insurmountable. It is hardly necessary to remark that works of art which are of intrinsic as well as artistic value are at higher risk than those which rely entirely on their aesthetic appeal.

Sometimes it was the risk of a very Christian compassion. When famine descended on a locality, there might be some, like St. Aethelwold of the tenth century, who—in the words of his biographer—declared "with a sigh of his inmost heart that he could not endure the continued existence of dumb metal whilst man, who was created in the image of God and redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, died of starvation and want "; and who would break up the precious vessels of the church to provide money to feed the starving poor. A similar action was taken by his contemporary, Leofric at St. Albans who "used to say that Christ's faithful people, especially the poor, were God's church and temple which should be preserved with special care " and a little later by Elphege at Canterbury. To buy food for themselves or others during times of famine in the twelfth century, St. Albans, Abingdon, Canterbury, Evesham and Ely all sold off treasures and, in the thirteenth century, their example was followed by Walter, Bishop of Norwich.

Sometimes, however, it was simply the risk of financial pressures or expansionist ambitions. There have always been those willing to sell works of art in order to pay off a debt or buy land or

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2 Ovid, *Met.*, II. 5, "Materiam superabat opus ".
3 L-B 5962.
4 L-B 3794.
5 L-B 632.
6 L-B 3841.
8 L-B 6210.
other possessions, and, of all works of art, those in precious metals are the most easily redeemable. At St. Albans, in the twelfth century, abbot Geoffrey melted down part of a shrine to pay for food during a period of famine. But his successor was prepared to recover gold from the same still unfinished shrine for quite other purposes—for the purchase of land.

At Abingdon in the twelfth century, accounts tell us that the abbot Ingulfus melted down an Anglo-Saxon reliquary given by King Cnut in order to relieve the extreme poverty occasioned by the civil wars under King Stephen. But they also tell us that the same abbot "stripped twelve reliquaries covered with pure gold and silver" in order to buy off the king's displeasure with a knight (who was presumably an estate-holder of the monastery) and that "towards the end of the abbot's life practically everything of gold and silver that was to be found in the church, whether in the form of reliquaries of saints or of vessels, was removed to settle his debts". At the same house, not long after the Conquest, a very large and particularly beautiful chalice was given in part payment for a village and there is no hint in the chronicle that this particular transaction was at all extraordinary.

Indeed, to find the purchase price for the liberties of Abingdon and Hornigmere in the early twelfth century, the abbot there actually broke up an engraved altar panel in gold and silver with figures of all the apostles, even though it was said to have been made by St. Aethelwold himself. Such treasures might go out to pawn as well as to sale for, if we are to believe a twelfth-century English poem on the evils of the age, usurers were responsible for despoiling numerous churches, taking chalices and fine crucifixes, gold cloths, good paintings, chasubles and veils, albs and hangings, stoles and draperies.

Though clearly accelerated in the twelfth century, the sale, or exchange, of works of art by religious houses must, in fact, have been taking place well before the Norman Conquest. Athelstan the Atheling, for example, refers in his will of 1015 to a drinking

1 L-B 3841. 2 L-B 3845. 3 L-B 55. 4 L-B 58. 5 L-B 56. 6 L-B 5993. 7 L-B 13. 8 L-B 6020.
horn that he had bought from the Old Minster, Winchester.  

But, more significantly, there is a law of Edward the Confessor which suggests that the sale of objects from churches was not uncommon, for it enjoins the buyer of such objects to get guarantees when he buys them.

Sometimes, the risk of financial pressures was much more inescapable because the pressures themselves were national. In the disastrous reign of King Ethelred (976-1016), when money was needed to buy off the Danes, the chronicle of Croyland tells us that "All the monasteries then began to be subjected to the most grievous exactions by King Ethelred and his chief men and ministers... Treasuries were plundered, sacred chalices as well as other treasures of monasteries were taken, and even the reliquaries of the saints were ordered to be despoiled by the requisitioners."

After the Conquest there were comparable sequestrations, particularly (as we shall see later) from those houses, like Ely and Waltham, with strong Anglo-Saxon sympathies. But there were to be more general exactions.

Having arranged an expedition to Jerusalem in 1096, count Robert of Normandy offered his duchy to William II of England in return for a lump sum of money. William was determined to raise it by any means in his not inconsiderable power, and the comments of two of the ablest of the English historians of the early twelfth century are as follows:

This money, [said Eadmer], which was partly given, partly levied throughout England, completely beggared the whole kingdom. The lust for power spared no ecclesiastical ornaments here, no sacred altar vessels, no reliquaries, no Gospel Books bound in gold or silver.

William of Malmesbury expands even on this:

In consequence, an edict for an intolerable tax was circulated throughout England. The bishops and abbots flocked to the court complaining about this outrage, pointing out that they were not able to meet such heavy taxation without completely dispossessing the wretched farmers. To which, the officials of the court, replying, as usual, with angry expression said "do you not have reliquaries made of gold and silver, full of the bones of the dead men?". No other reply did they

2 L-B 5405.
3 L-B 5969.
4 L-B 6013.
deign to give to their petitioners. So the latter seeing the drift of the reply, stripped the reliquaries of the saints, despoiled the crucifixes, melted down the chalices, not for the benefit of the poor but for the king’s treasury. Almost everything which the holy parsimony of their ancestors had preserved, was consumed by the avarice of these extortioners.¹

It is well known that the enormous ransom for King Richard was only met at the cost of a tremendous depletion of art treasures in the country.

The harshest levies [says one account], were laid upon the whole of England to ransom the king. All and sundry, whether ecclesiastical or secular, were obliged to pay one quarter of their income. Thereupon, the chalices of the churches and the ampullae, the crucifixes and candelabra, the Gospel Books and thuribles of gold and silver, even the reliquaries of the saints were stripped and melted down and handed over to the king’s ministers.²

We know from other sources that this was no exaggeration. For one thing a special petition had to be made to the Pope to enable priests in England to celebrate with tin chalices.³ For another, we hear of King Richard himself in 1195 distributing chalices to some churches which had lost their own.⁴ The chronicle of Bury St. Edmunds is perhaps as eloquent as any source on the devastating consequences of Richard’s imprisonment:

Seeing that the silver frontal of the high altar and many other precious ornaments had been removed to pay for the recovery of Mildenhall and the ransom of King Richard, the abbot [Samson, 1182-1211] was unwilling to replace it and other such ornaments which in a similar situation could be torn away and broken up . . . For when King Richard was taken captive in Germany, there was not a treasure in England that was not given or taken . . . ⁵

The most catastrophic blow to English art-treasures between the civil wars of Stephen and the Reformation of Henry VIII must have been this call to ransom Richard. But the needs of other kings could lead to depredations on a smaller scale. So, when a king like Henry III asked the religious foundations throughout England for help towards the marriage of his eldest daughter, Margareta, there were some, like the priory of Worcester, which had to find part of the payment by relinquishing a silver vessel.⁶ Then the ill-will of others could be equally unfortunate. As a

¹ L-B 6012. ² L-B 6114. ³ L-B 6115. ⁴ L-B 6119. ⁵ LB- 525. ⁶ L-B 6186.
result of his quarrel with Canterbury, for example, we know that King John ordered cathedral books, gold and silver vessels and other church ornaments to be sold.\(^1\) The royal treasury might be as much at risk as those of the churches and monasteries and, though there were probably by now few Anglo-Saxon works of art in the treasury of Henry III, there is at least a full understanding of what was really lost in the description of how he had to melt his treasures down in order to meet a currency crisis:

\[\ldots\] arrangements were made (in 1248) for the vessels, utensils and jewels from the treasury of the king to be sold by weight, without taking any account of the \ldots skilful and painstaking workmanship even though the workmanship might be greater than the material.\(^2\)

Of course, apart from crises such as these, precious objects had always attracted the attention of thieves throughout the Middle Ages. "In this same year in Whitsun week", says the Anglo-Saxon chronicle under the year 1102, "there came thieves, some from Auvergne, some from France and some from Flanders, and broke into the monastery of Peterborough and took in it much of value in gold and silver—crosses and chalices and candlesticks."\(^3\) We learn from another account that some of the works of art stolen were certainly Anglo-Saxon and that, though the thieves were eventually caught, their booty was not restored to the monastery but went to the king.\(^4\)

Thefts, in fact, might be perpetrated by those appointed to protect. Abingdon found this in 1066 when Edward the Confessor's Queen—determined to take the finest works of art for herself during these unsettled times—"commanded the more precious items to be handed over to her". She rejected the less important objects with which the abbot and brothers hoped to buy off her displeasure and insisted on only the finest. Eventually she took a chasuble entirely covered with marvellous gold embroidery, a Gospel Book enriched with gold and jewels and a fine robe and stole.\(^5\) The monastery was not better served by the Norman monks intruded into it, for we later hear that the Norman sacristan stole from it important Anglo-Saxon treasures

\(^1\) L-B 858. \(^2\) L-B 6191. \(^3\) Ed. Whitelock, p. 178. \(^4\) L-B 3463. \(^5\) L-B 5992.
associated with St. Aethelwold and removed them to his own former house of Jumièges.\(^1\) A similar fate was suffered by Peterborough some thirty or forty years later when their two sacristans stole and took overseas many objects, including an Anglo-Saxon chasuble of some beauty "which flashed like gold in the house of the Lord";\(^2\) and when, furthermore, their own abbot, Turold, himself took many artistic objects to France with him which were almost all consequently lost to the house.\(^3\)

From the monastery of Coventry, the local bishop, Robert, who assumed office twenty years after the Conquest, stole church treasures "in order to pander to Roman greed" and the chronicler openly accuses him of embezzlement and theft.\(^4\) We also know that at Ely Bishop Nigel (1133–69) broke up for his own purposes some fine works of art. These included an Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion with a life-size silver-plated figure of Christ flanked by bronze figures of Mary and John and two wonderfully made Anglo-Saxon crucifixes of gold and silver, inset with precious stones.\(^5\)

Over and above these hazards was one of the most serious of all—that of warfare in an age inured to conflict, and expecting plunder as its reward.

The great destruction of art by the Danes in the ninth century is well enough known and is pointed by a famous and poignant remark of King Alfred. "I remembered", he wrote in the preface to his translation of Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*, "I remembered how I saw, before it had all been ravaged and burnt, how the churches throughout the whole of England stood filled with treasures and books."\(^6\)

There is confirmation of the immense damage wrought by the Danes in other sources. The later Chronicle of St. Albans, for example, still recalls that "when the madness of the Danes raged more fiercely in England and everything lay exposed to looting and burning and there was none to resist them, they had the effrontery to make a savage attack on the church of the blessed

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\(^1\) L-B 13.  
\(^2\) L-B 3461.  
\(^3\) Ibid.  
\(^4\) L-B 1132.  
\(^5\) L-B 1545, 1531.  
Alban and to despoil the whole treasure of the church of its vessels and vestments."  

They destroyed nunneries like that at Ely and plundered monasteries like that at Canterbury, despoiling it of many of its treasures. Under the year 997, the Anglo-Saxon chronicle reads:

In this year the Danish army went around Devon into the mouth of the Severn and ravaged there, both in Cornwall, in Wales and in Devon. And they landed at Watchet and did much damage there, burning and slaying; and after that they turned back around Land's End to the southern side, and then turned into the mouth of the Tamar, and went inland until they reached Lydford, burning and slaying everything they came across, and burnt down Ordwulf's monastery at Tavistock and took with them to their ships indescribable booty.

This booty, of course, is what they were concerned with. And the works of art in gold and silver in the religious houses where the wealth of the country was largely concentrated offered the richest and easiest hauls. Normally, these works of art would simply be melted down, though there is one remarkable instance of them actually selling back to the English something the value of which could not be so easily realized. It was a sumptuous manuscript of the eighth century which was bought from the Danes by the ealdorman Alfred and his wife Wæburh and given by them to Canterbury. It is now in the Royal Library at Stockholm and generally referred to as the Golden Gospels of Stockholm, and apparently was only one of a number so reclaimed to Christianity. The inscription inside is as follows:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I, Ealdorman Alfred and Wæburh my wife obtained these books from the heathen army with our pure money, that is, with pure gold, and this we did for the love of God and for the benefit of our souls, and because we did not wish these holy books to remain longer in heathen possession. And now they wish to give them to Christ Church to the praise and glory and honour of God, and in gratitude for His Passion, and for the use of the religious community which daily raises praise to God in Christ Church; on condition that they shall be read every month for Alfred and for Wæburh and Ealhthryth, for the eternal remedy of their souls, as long as God has foreseen that the Christian faith shall continue at that place. Moreover, I, Ealdorman Alfred and Wæburh beg and implore in the name of Almighty God and of all his saints, that no man be so presumptuous as to give away or remove these holy books from Christ Church, as long as the Christian faith may endure.

1 L-B 3783.  
2 L-B 1523.  
3 Willis, op. cit. p. 9.  
These plundering raids were to continue for some time to come and, even as late as 1066, there was a full-scale invasion by the Danes who plundered from Peterborough eleven shrines, twelve crosses or crucifixes and a great altar panel all of gold, silver and precious gems and "more gold and silver in the form of objects and ornaments of different kinds and more books that anyone can say or value. All these were of the finest quality and nothing comparable remained in the whole of England".¹

William the Conqueror caused more havoc to Anglo-Saxon art than any body of Danish freebooters. England for him was a vanquished colony whose artistic patrimony could be seized at will and either broken up for his treasury or sent as gifts to Rome or to numerous churches in France. His was a colonial attitude readily adopted by other Normans such, for example, as his half-brother Odo who did not hesitate to steal (or, as he would probably have put it, requisition) a precious crozier from Durham² or by Norman monks in English monasteries, as we know only too well from houses like Abingdon³ and Peterborough.⁴ To recover the Conqueror’s favour at the time of the Conquest, Ely had to raise money by breaking up a large Anglo-Saxon figure in gold and silver of the Virgin with her Child, gold and silver statues of virgins, crucifixes, reliquaries, book-covers and so on.⁵ From Abingdon, the Normans seized "a wealth of gold and silver vestments, books and vessels of different kinds intended for the rites and honour of the church" as well as all the valuables lodged in the monastery for safe-keeping by local residents seeking security for their private treasures.⁶ Not even Anglo-Saxon works of art given by former kings were immune, as the New Minster at Winchester discovered when the two large statues of gold and silver, and the noble crucifix of gold set with precious stones, presented by Cnut, were quickly seized.⁷ The unctuousness and euphemisms of the Conqueror’s biographer, William of Poitiers, do not gloss over the tremendous losses of Anglo-Saxon art sustained under him and his son.

¹ L-B 3458. ² L-B 6005. ³ L-B 14. ⁴ L-B 3461. ⁵ L-B 1551. ⁶ L-B 25. ⁷ L-B 4701.
In England, wrote William the Conqueror's biographer:

treasures, great in their number, their kind and their workmanship, had been amassed, destined either to be kept for the empty pleasure of avarice or to be used shamefully in English luxury. Some of these he generously bestowed on those who had helped in the war now concluded: most of them, and these the most precious, he distributed among the needy monasteries of various provinces. He sent to the Roman church of St. Peter more abundant wealth in gold and silver than would be believed if we told it, and sent into the possession of Pope Alexander ornaments which Byzantium would hold very dear. We might specially mention the banner of King Harold, which had the figure of an armed man woven in it in purest gold: with this booty he made return for the gift which had been sent to him through the kindness of this Apostle... In a thousand churches in France, Aquitaine, Burgundy and Auvergne and other regions, the memory of King William will be celebrated in perpetuity. The ever-present greatness of his benefaction will not allow the memory of the benefactor to die. Some received gold crucifixes of great size remarkably adorned with jewels, many were given pounds of gold or vessels made of the same metal, several received vestments or other precious gifts. The least of the gifts with which he gladdened a small monastery would splendidly adorn a metropolitan basilica.... But, the most pleasurable gifts were sent to Normandy... where they were found more acceptable than any gift of beauty or delight that Arabia might have made.¹

He had various gifts sent to the church of Caen so precious in their material and workmanship that they deserve to be honoured to the end of time. To describe or even enumerate each of them would take too much space. To gaze at them is a gratification for the most distinguished visitors even those who had often seen the treasuries of famous churches. And were a Greek or Arab visitor to pass by, he, too, would be carried away by the same delight.²

Of William's visit to Fécamp, William of Poitiers continues:

When they saw the garments of the King and of his princely attendants which were woven and encrusted with gold they considered cheap all that they had seen before. They marvelled, too, at the gold and silver vessels and, in truth, the account of their number and beauty would strain credulity. A huge banquet of people drank only from these or from ox-horns decorated with the same metal round both ends. Then, they noted several treasures of this kind, appropriate to royal magnificence, so that they might speak of them when they returned home because of their rarity.³

English monasteries that were considered inimical to William were ruthlessly pirated. We do not know what might also have been taken from other houses, most of which were filled with Norman monks for, clearly, it was not in the interest of these

² Idem, p. 256.
colonizers to leave an account in England of what they had sent back to their homeland.

As probably the worst example of what happened to those monasteries that did not win William's favour, I shall quote here the monastery at Waltham which had the misfortune to have counted Harold among its patrons. What it lost under William I and his son, William II, a later chronicler recorded as follows:

we considered that we should insert on this page a disclosure of those things which were forcibly removed and sent to Normandy by the first Norman king of England, William, . . . from the church of the Holy Cross [at Waltham]. For, so we read, this king sent to Normandy seven reliquaries, three of which were of gold and four of silver-gilt with precious gems . . . four Gospel Books embellished with gold, silver and precious stones; four large censers of gold and silver, six candelabra, two of gold and the rest of silver; three great silver and gilt ewers of Byzantine work; four crucifixes fashioned in gold, silver and precious stones; one crucifix cast from fifty marks of silver; five most precious priestly vestments adorned with gold and precious stones; five chasubles adorned with gold and precious stones in one of which there were twelve marks of gold; two copes adorned with gold and precious stones; five chalices, two of gold the rest of silver; four altars with relics, one of gold, the rest of silver-gilt; one silver drinking-horn valued at one hundred shillings; ten phylacteries, one made from two marks of gold and precious stones, the rest adorned with gold and silver; two crozier-handles; women's chairs fashioned from a large amount of gold; two valuable bells. These and a great many other things, which it would be a long task to record, and which the covetous Normans thought incomparable, are known . . . to have been enviously removed by William.¹

William's son, the second William, the chronicler continues:

did not hesitate to assault the church of Waltham . . . and to adorn the church at Caen from his plundering . . . as if, from the property of others and from one altar forcibly despoiled, another may be adorned, and as if the amputated limbs of his own son may be offered to a father as a pleasing and precious gift. According to an authentic account written by the hand of master Adelard, who ruled over the church at that time, the wealth which he [William II] removed from the church on one occasion alone, in the form of gold and silver caskets, crucifixes, Gospel Books, and other gold and silver works of art, was estimated at 6,662 pounds. He also took a chasuble woven of gold . . . four bells which were valuable for that time and an incalculable treasure . . . these two [churches at Caen] rejoice even today in the spoils thus acquired, and there are inscribed in these very caskets and Gospel Books the names of the nobles who presented them to the church at Waltham with the witness and authority of archbishop Genius (i.e. Kinsige, archbishop of York, 1051-60).²

¹ L-B 4484.
² L-B 4485.
Even after the Conquest, there was no security for works of art in England: nor could there be any in a society where law and order were so brittle and could shatter so easily under a weak or unfortunate king.

According to the Anglo-Saxon chronicle, the anarchy during the reign of Stephen caused more destruction than the invasion of the Danes.

There had never been till then greater misery in the country, nor had heathens ever done worse than they [the traitors] did. For contrary to custom, they respected neither church nor churchyard, but took all the property that was inside, and then burnt the church and everything together.¹

The secular people fared just as badly for

both by night and day they took those people that they thought had any goods—men and women—and put them in prison and tortured them with indescribable torture to extort gold and silver—for no martyrs were ever so tortured as they were.²

Reports from various centres make it clear that the Anglo-Saxon chronicle was not exaggerating. The destruction, the plundering and the looting must, indeed, have recalled the calamitous times of the Danes. So, in 1139 both Worcester and Winchcombe were sacked by Miles of Gloucester, and Tewkesbury was attacked by Stephen.³ In 1142 the monastery of Coventry was turned into a fortress by Robert Marmion, Evesham was plundered by William Beauchamp, and Malmesbury invaded by Robert Fitzhubert. In 1140 Robert Fitzwalter ravaged Wilton Abbey (the nunnery founded for ladies of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy) and, during the next year, in the fighting at Winchester, Hyde Abbey was reduced to ashes and the nunnery there burnt too. We also know that the nunnery at Wherwell was burnt and the monastery of Abingdon plundered. At Ramsay, the ejected monks had to watch their abbey being used as a barracks by Geoffrey of Mandeville, who also seized Ely. The latter place had further to sell off part of its treasures in order to buy off royal agents like William of Ypres who was threatening to burn

¹ Ed. Whitelock, p. 199.
² Ibid.
³ See for this and the remaining information of the paragraph Knowles, op. cit. pp. 269–71.
the town. Some of the treasures lost or sold at this time must have included those inherited from the Anglo-Saxon past and we know, for example, that Abingdon was forced to break up “three extremely beautiful crucifixes” given by St. Aethelwold himself.¹

Though the worst example of anarchy, this was by no means the end of disruptions in England. Nor should we forget that invasions and skirmishes on borders continued throughout the Middle Ages. The Scots in the North, the Welsh in the West and the French on the Southern coast were always ready to harry whenever they felt they could do so with impunity. And, in their search for plunder, there is ample evidence that the treasuries of local monasteries and churches were well up on their lists of priorities. Thus, in the West, we learn that when King Griffin of Wales (d. 1063) forced an entrance into Hereford,

Seven Canons who had defended the doors of the principal basilica were killed and the monastery, which Athelstan, God’s true priest and Christ’s worships, had built, was burnt together with all its ornaments and the relics of St. Egelbert, King and Martyr, and of other saints. Several of the citizens were killed and many taken prisoner, and when they had plundered and burned the city, they returned home, enriched by considerable spoils.²

In the North, we hear of how in the twelfth century the Scots “devastated and sacked and burned villages, churches and houses.”³ Amongst other incidents recorded in the thirteenth century is the following:

In the Church of Hexham, which the Lord’s noble Bishop St. Wilfrid built, there were many shrines, preserved from ancient times, which held the relics of saintly fathers whose merits and works are treated by the holy Bede in his De Gestis Anglorum. The church itself, which was outstanding for its Roman work, was dedicated in honour of St. Andrew, most gentle of the Apostles and patron saint of the Scots, and to the service of the Blessed Wilfrid. And . . . these mad men [the Scots] . . . in their wild savagery destroyed the hallowed buildings with fire and seized the church property they found. . . . Their unrestrained course brought them to this mark of their blasphemy that they contemptuously cast into the fire the relics of the saints which lay buried in their tombs, tore off the plates of gold and silver, and the precious stones, and jeeringly chopped off the head of the effigy of St. Andrew as he presented his face to them and commanded him to go and tread upon his own soil.⁴

¹ L-B 14. ² L-B 2045. ³ L-B 5675. ⁴ L-B 2119.
Returning later to Hexham under William Wallace, the Scots asked the priests there to celebrate Mass only in order to steal the chalice and Mass book used in the Divine Office, together with other ornaments of the altar.¹

Sad though it is, the remark by a fifteenth-century chronicler at Canterbury about the hazards of works of art in precious materials is very much of an understatement. "I cannot note, without a sigh", said Thomas of Elmham,

that I am utterly at a loss as to what I should now write about the gold and silver vessels which, as Bede and other historians relate, were gathered together by the blessed Gregory and transmitted by him through Augustine to this monastery [of St. Augustine at Canterbury]. For some say that at the time when the unholy Danes ravaged the land, because of their frequent incursions into those parts, everything was hidden away in secret places which are not yet revealed. Others say that in the time of Richard I, the gifts mentioned were removed from the monastery for the Duke of Austria [Leopold V] to ransom the king from imprisonment. Yet another opinion is that, when abbot Egelsinus fled to Denmark . . . in the year 1071 for fear of William the Conqueror, and William confiscated the monastery and all that belonged to it and appointed a certain monk called Scotlandus as abbot, valuables of this kind, with many others, were stored away in secret places which are not known to posterity.²

Even so the worst was yet to be. Thomas of Elmham might give a gentle sigh at the thought of the loss of the few treasures brought to England at the time of its conversion in the sixth century, but he would have been entirely desolated if he could have looked ahead and seen the almost complete devastation of English art treasures by the Reformation of the sixteenth. Virtually all those works of art in precious metals that had survived the fire and famines and financial crises, the invasions and warfare and anarchy of the Middle Ages were then to be seized and melted down. And they were not few. Indeed, at the end of the Middle Ages, foreigners were clearly staggered by the wealth of artistic treasures in England. "Their riches", wrote one Italian visitor about 1500,

are displayed in the Church treasures; for there is not a parish church in the kingdom so mean as not to possess crucifixes, candlesticks, censers, patens and cups of silver. Nor is there a convent of mendicant friars so poor, as not to have all these same articles in silver besides many other ornaments worthy of a Cathedral church in the same metal. Your magnificence may therefore imagine what the

¹ L-B 2120.
² L-B 850.
decorations of those enormously rich Benedictine, Carthusian, and Cistercian monasteries must be.\(^1\)

These rich monasteries might each have a number of shrines and reliquaries of precious metals and Canterbury Cathedral had no less than 56.\(^2\) Its chief shrine was, of course, that of St. Thomas which was not Anglo-Saxon, "The spoile of which shrine in golde and pretious stones", read he Reformation records, "filled two great chests such as six or seaven strong men could do no more than convey one of them out of the church".\(^3\) Madame de Montreuil, visiting it in 1538, "was not a little marveilled of the great riches thereof, saing to be innumerable; and that if she had not seen it, all the men in the wourlde would never a made her belyve it".\(^4\) Earlier, the level-headed Erasmus has commented that "one would call Midas and Croesus beggars in view of the power of gold and silver there to be seen"; "the most worthless part there was the gold, every part glowed, sparkled and flashed with rare and large gems".\(^5\) An Italian visitor wrote similarly:

The tomb of St. Thomas the martyr, archbishop of Canterbury, exceeds all belief. Notwithstanding its great size, it is wholly covered with plates of pure gold; yet the gold is scarcely seen because it is covered with various precious stones, as sapphires, balasses, diamonds, rubies and emeralds; and wherever the eye turns something more beautiful than the rest is observed. Nor, in addition to these natural beauties, is the skill of art wanting, for in the midst of the gold are the most beautiful sculptured gems both small and large. . . . The church is somewhat dark, particularly in the spot where the shrine is placed, and when we went to see it the sun was near setting.\(^6\)

The sun was also setting for English medieval art.

How much of this vast artistic wealth had survived from the Anglo-Saxon past to be wiped away by the final cataclysm we cannot know. But we should not be too deceived by the accounts of losses given by medieval writers into supposing that little or nothing was left.

\(^3\) Quoted Woodruff and Danks, p. 82.
\(^4\) Ibid. p. 81.
\(^5\) Ibid. p. 80.
\(^6\) Quoted in Gasquet, pp. 405–6.
However loud and anguished their cries over the destruction of treasures of the past, they were singularly silent about what remained. As we read on one page of the sad list of losses and picture to ourselves the forlorn and derelict House of God that remains our hearts are twisted with compassion. Yet a few pages further on it can be twisted again with another list of losses and a few pages later twisted yet again. But, we have by now been so harrowed that we grow cautious and simply wonder how much of Anglo-Saxon art was still in fact untouched.

So the Ely Chronicler describes the sacrifices of precious ornaments made to buy off William the Conqueror’s displeasure in 1071. Precious crosses, altars, reliquaries, book-covers, chalices, patens, bowls, stoups and dishes were sold and when more money was required all the gold and silver objects left in the church, including the wonderful figure of St. Mary sitting on a throne holding her son, which abbot Aelfsinus [981–1019] had made from gold and silver, were broken up. Similarly, the statues of the holy virgins were stripped of their lavish adornment of gold and silver, so that the sum of money could be paid.1

We might not surmise from this that there were still treasures to be plundered—this time by seven Winchester monks in 1093

Bolting the doors, they shut themselves inside and fell like madmen upon all the finest valuables, seizing and stealing them for themselves. These included richly-ornamented coverings, silken draperies and fine and costly hangings, of which nothing reckoned more precious could be found in all the area around; for the whole set seemed to be covered with gold. Not content with that, they took and hid in their possession reliquaries with the remains of many saints, impiously removed from their shrines, and most notably the head of the most blessed confessor, the lord Botulph, and his larger bones, which they obtained by breaking open his reliquary. Thus, after stealing these and whatever else they could lay hands on, and replenishing their packs with a great deal of silver and gold, they were ready, and did not delay their departure.2

Nor that an inventory made in the same year could—apart from an immense number of magnificent vestments—include

27 crucifixes, both large and small, and six statues, from three of which some of the silver has been stolen; all the crucifixes are adorned with gold and silver, and the statues likewise. Twelve shrines, large and small, adorned with gold and silver, and 8 undecorated ones: 14 book-covers both large and small, adorned with gold and silver; three altars decorated with gold and silver, and two altar-panels

1 L-B 1551.
2 L-B 1556.
decorated with gold and silver. Four frontals, two large and two small, decorated with gold and silver; two censers decorated with gold and silver; eight phylacteries, three decorated and five plain: Twenty-six chalices, both large and small; of these one is entirely of gold, and one of silver; the rest are a mixture of gold and silver, and four of them lack patens. Three silver reeds adorned with gold; three silver cruets, one gilded. Three censers, one entirely of silver without gold, one of silver-gilt, the third of gilded bronze, all have silver chains. Two silver candlesticks adorned with gold, and four bronze ones also adorned with gold. One silver ewer adorned with gold, and one basin entirely of silver.¹

Nor that Bishop Nigel in 1144 could still turn to large and splendid works of art of the Anglo-Saxon period from which to raise money and that these could include two tenth-century crucifixes wonderfully wrought of gold and silver,² another of the same period in which the body of Christ was hollowed out to take relics,³ as well as a life-size silver plated figure of Christ accompanied by bronze figures of St. Mary and St. John.⁴

Like obituarists over the departed, the chroniclers wax most eloquent over the irrecoverable. They tell us what they have lost but have little to say about what remains.

How much of Anglo-Saxon art survived the Middle Ages—their fires and famines, their financial crises and invasions, their warfare and anarchy—to be finally swept away by that great movement called the Reformation where religious zeal and economic self-interest were so neatly dovetailed that there was no room for England's great artistic inheritance, this we shall never know. What we can know is this. That when scholars enthuse over the odd Anglo-Saxon brooch or paper weight or sword pommel that survived the sixteenth-century maelstrom, they are enthusing over the tiniest crumbs from a lost feast. Anglo-Saxon art in its entirety must have been an aesthetic banquet really heroic in its proportions.

¹ L-B 1557. ² L-B 1531. ³ L-B 1528. ⁴ L-B 1545.