

Fourteenth-century Ways of Seeing: the Chancel Wall Paintings at Chalgrove, Oxfordshire

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SUMMARY

The chancel of the Church of St Mary the Virgin, Chalgrove, is richly adorned with early fourteenth-century wall paintings. They illustrate scenes from the life of Christ and his mother, arranged chronologically, and the theme of human salvation, seen in the Jesse Tree on the north-west wall and the General Resurrection painting on the south-west, in both of which the Virgin features. This article is an attempt to interpret the symbolic layers of meaning in the cycle, with particular reference to the arrangement of the paintings, and to discover its religious and emotional significance to the fourteenth-century worshipper, while placing it in its historical context.

Since their discovery in the nineteenth century the wall paintings in the chancel at St Mary's, Chalgrove (Plate 1), have deservedly received much attention. When they were found they were almost immediately sketched, and their subjects initially identified; they have since been placed by E. W. Tristram, and more recently by Miriam Gill, into the larger context of English fourteenth-century wall painting; they have been restored through a number of stages, and new features thereby revealed; their subject matter has been reviewed by S. T. J. Maynard, and they have been presented in a thorough and at the same time accessible guidebook to demonstrate their importance and complexity to a non-specialist public by a local expert, Robert Heath-Whyte.¹ It seems that most of the facts about them have been uncovered, and that there is no further ground to till. We can see where they are and roughly what they represent, and all commentators agree on the most likely explanation for their creation, which has been associated with the gift of the living of the church to the Cistercian community at Thame by Edward II and the patronage of local families, notably the Barentin family, who made the new chancel their family mausoleum. So is there anything left to say which won't be hopelessly speculative?

The intention here is to follow up some trails which have already been indicated and pursue them a little more in order to try to appreciate as fully as possible the many levels upon which these paintings might have been apprehended originally. Why are these narratives in this location? Why are they arranged in this way? What explains the particular emphases which the narratives receive? By further contextualizing the Chalgrove paintings, it may be possible to gain even more understanding about how they were understood sacramentally, devotionally, and parochially, and what they tell us about medieval ways of seeing. As with so much visual culture of the Middle Ages, the primary sources for exploring this subject, beyond the paintings themselves, are scant indeed, but a way forward is perhaps to sketch in as fully as possible the background to the Chalgrove programme, so that a profile, a shape, if only a blank one, emerges, enclosed by that background. It might be possible to produce a silhouette, if not a featured portrait.

¹ E. W. Tristram, *English Wall Paintings of the Fourteenth Century* (London, 1955); M. Gill, 'Late medieval wall painting in England: content and context, c.1350-c.1530' (London Ph.D. thesis, 2001). Gill's thesis begins after the period to which the Chalgrove paintings are usually dated, but nevertheless provides useful context and background for the period as a whole; S. T. J. Maynard, 'A study of the wall paintings in the chancel of St Mary's Chalgrove', (York, M.A. thesis, 1986); R. W. Heath-Whyte, *An Illustrated Guide to the Medieval Wall Paintings in the Church of St Mary the Virgin at Chalgrove in the County of Oxfordshire* (Chalgrove, 2003). The wall paintings were sketched by, among others, C. A. Buckler, in 1859, and were reproduced in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, ns 8 (1860), pp. 274, 367, 547–56; Tristram's original sketches of the 1930s, reproduced in *English Wall Paintings*, are in the V&A. (E. 1536–1540).



Fig. 1. The Virgin Mary from the east splay of the Annunciation window (north wall).
(*Photograph by author.*)

The paintings (see Plate 1) can be no earlier than the 1300s, when Drew Barentin II undertook the extensive building programmes on his manor, including the reconstruction of the chancel. The *terminus post quem* is a little more difficult. There are stylistic features which indicate a mid-century date, and Jane Geddes has pointed out the design of the door hinges, presumably made for the new chancel, which cannot be much prior to c.1350.² The architectural embellishment also shows a hint of innovations taking place at the highest level in the 1320s, in as much as the traceried windows are imitated in paint in one of the window splays to give a distinctive, integrated Perpendicular aesthetic to the design (Fig. 1). That this style emanated from the court circle of Edward II, who was directly involved in the gift of Chalgrove to Thame, might explain such precocity at a parochial level, but it could be that the feature would support a date also in the mid-century.³ However, for the purposes of this essay, precise dates are not necessary for the argument, and it will be assumed that we are dealing with a programme which belongs to the first half of the fourteenth century.

The decorative medium is painted. Despite the almost contemporary sculptural programme in the chancel of nearby Dorchester, and the abundance of good quality stone available locally, the patrons of Chalgrove chose a painted and therefore, one must assume, cheaper option. Whether this was supplemented by a stained-glass programme is debatable. It is surprising, given the evidence of patronage by a local and influential family, that there is no evidence of heraldry or family badges in the decoration, of the kind that appears, for instance, at South Newington, near Banbury, in the 1330s to commemorate the Giffard family. Heraldic glass may therefore once have been a feature of the windows, perhaps in the window heads rather than taking up the whole of the main lights. The similarity between the fictive niches and the window tracery has led to a suggestion that there were further saints depicted in the north and south windows themselves.⁴ This theory is problematic with regard to the Annunciation scene in the north-west window splays. The Annunciation in either architectural or micro-architectural contexts almost without exception frames openings – doors, arches, or windows. Certainly other English fourteenth-century free-standing painted Annunciations in chancels are presented in this way.⁵ In the architectonic framework of an altarpiece, it may frame an image representing redemption or salvation, usually the Crucifixion, but it would be unusual to have a free-standing, as opposed to a narrative, image of this type on the north, as opposed to the east, wall. On the other hand, it would be very odd for these two figures, the Virgin and Gabriel, one of whom was not even the focus of a saintly cult, to stand in a line, as it has been suggested, with two other saints depicted in the window lights between. Equally strange would be if the window, the central part of the composition, was simply dedicated to the more peripheral details of the standard iconography of the Annunciation, such as the lily pot, the scrolls, and the dove representing the Holy Spirit. Perhaps it is pointless to speculate further, and the original treatment of the windows must remain a mystery.

Far fewer schemes of wall painting survive in chancels than in naves, probably because they have more often been reordered and restored as liturgical fashions have changed over the centuries. In the local area fragmentary examples can be seen at Eynsham and formerly at St James's in

² Heath-Whyte, *Illustrated Guide*, pp. 6, 8.

³ The emergence of the so-called Perpendicular style is evident in the design of St Stephen's chapel, which was part of Westminster Palace. This was being built from the 1290s and was completed in 1348. It shows wall and window surfaces integrated by the application of grid tracery throughout in the same way as Chalgrove's designer uses the same tracery design for painted niche and window tracery. Indeed, the tracery of the north and south windows at Chalgrove more or less imitates the central two lights and traceried head of the lower chapel windows at St Stephen's. See J. J. G. Alexander and Paul Binski, eds, *The Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England, 1200–1400* (London, 1987), pp. 337–9.

⁴ Heath-Whyte, *Illustrated Guide*, p. 12.

⁵ E.g., at Harbledown, Kent, and Little Melton, Norfolk, where the Annunciation flanks the east window, and Martley-with-Hillhampton, Worcs., where it is depicted over the south door in the chancel.



Fig. 2. The Virgin's funerary procession (south wall). (Photograph by author.)

Cowley.⁶ During the period when the Chalgrove programme was created there was a wide range of chancel iconography. Most schemes were either hagiographical, often celebrating, but by no means always, the life of the patron saint of the church, or focused on the life of Christ and his mother.⁷ Very few seemed to focus explicitly on the liturgical purpose of the chancel, and indeed on the whole these schemes do not differ significantly from nave decoration either in content or in the way the images are represented. Since Chalgrove is relatively more complete than others, it is more instructive in demonstrating how images were arranged, showing us that a narrative sequence was only one of the ways in which scenes and figures related to one another. It is also typical in its hagiographical, Christological, and Marian content. How far we can therefore take Chalgrove as a paradigm for chancel painting of the period depends on whether its intellectual complexity is typical or not. Although the complex, non-linear arrangement of imagery does have parallels, say, in manuscript painting, the visual connections which are thereby set up do seem, at least to this writer, exceptional.

Is the nexus of visual connections described below, where images may be read in two or three dimensions and from the bottom up or from right to left, a feature which is connected with this rarefied priestly space? Whilst subject and treatment may be similar in both nave and chancel, most surviving nave schemes of the period order their narratives in a simpler and more conventional way, at least from the modern viewer's perspective. At Great Tew, for instance, the Passion sequence in the south aisle is set out like a modern cartoon, starting top left and finishing bottom right. Similarly at Croughton the childhood scenes on the south wall and the Passion scenes on the north unfold in a linear manner, reading from left to right, from top to bottom. Ironically this is a literate way of reading, in other words, the scenes follow one from another in the same sequence as eyes would follow a written page. Yet the location in the church reserved for the more sophisticated and almost certainly literate eyes by this period – the chancel – challenges the eyes to move more gymnastically, as we can see at Chalgrove. Without a complete record of the wall paintings of the period, it is impossible to substantiate this theory, but it raises the question of the sophistication of visual apprehension in the fourteenth century and may suggest that literacy has rather blunted that faculty.

⁶ Tristram, *English Wall Painting*, pp. 159–60, 170. Scenes from the life of St Catherine of Alexandria survive on the north wall of the chancel at Eynsham. The paintings from St James's, Cowley, were destroyed in the late nineteenth century, but tracings were made, which are kept in the Bodleian. Scenes included St Anne teaching the Virgin, a Virgin and Child, the Trinity, and Christ in Majesty.

⁷ E.g., chancels with episodes from lives of their patronal saints include Idsworth, Hants (St Hubert), Kingston Lisle, Berks. (St John the Baptist), and Bengoe, Herts. (St Leonard). Chancels with episodes from the life of Christ and his mother include North Cove, Suff., where there is a Passion series, and Brinsop, Heref., where the Annunciation and Visitation are depicted.

There are both specific narratives and universal narratives at Chalgrove – in other words, there are familiar episodes tying together the life of Christ and his mother in chronological order, and there is an overarching story of human salvation from the Jesse Tree image on the north-west wall to the General Resurrection on the south-west.⁸ These stories are related not only through their content, but also through the manner of their visual telling. Where they are on the wall, how each episode is positioned next to the others, whether they are high or low, east or west, adds symbolic and even emotional nuances to their meaning. There is only one space where the narrative becomes linear, and that is in the great processional friezes at the top of each wall, where on the one side we see the Virgin's funeral procession and on the other Christ's progress to Calvary, both series beginning at the west and moving east (Fig. 2). These examples also represent a principle which is embedded in the programme as a whole, which is to relate the pictures across space. The Virgin's story moves towards her Assumption as Christ's does towards his Resurrection, both of which take place on the east wall, flanking the window, so the viewer is invited to connect these narratives across the space of the chancel. This can, of course, be seen in much grander schemes than Chalgrove, from the mosaics at Monreale to the frescoes of Giotto's Arena Chapel at Padua and Piero della Francesca's Arezzo chapel, but the fact that this way of seeing is invited here in an apparently parochial setting may say something about the level of sophistication of Chalgrove's original designers and audience.⁹

There are other devices, too, which are employed to direct and colour our reading. The stories of Christ and the Virgin begin at the bottom of the wall between the two windows, each starting from the west and then zigzagging upwards through two tiers before linking in with the friezes at the top (Fig. 3). This upward-moving zigzag arrangement is conventional and can be seen, for instance, in Parisian ivory diptychs of the later Middle Ages.¹⁰ It is, one assumes, a way of contemplating which derives from the model of natural growth, and the exultant sprouting of golden foliage above the window heads around the chancel would seem to suggest this way of viewing (Fig. 4). At the east end of the friezes, however, something a little more inventive goes on. Here Christ is crucified, taken down from the cross, and buried, and the move downwards into the earth and the move down towards death is visually expressed by the images moving down from the top to the bottom of the wall. Opposite, a similar sequence is mirrored in the story of the Virgin, which begins at the top with her burial. What happens in the lower two scenes is either difficult to explain or to identify. Heath-Whyte describes the middle scene as Thomas showing the girdle to the Apostles at supper, which seems also to be indicated by Buckler's sketch made in 1859 soon after the paintings were discovered.

This episode does not appear in the *Golden Legend* accounts of the narrative, where Thomas appears as the disciple who does not believe in the Bodily Assumption and is convinced of its truth, as described below, only by the Virgin's throwing her girdle down to him in one version, or by insisting that the other Apostles open up her tomb to demonstrate that she is not there in another. It does, however, feature in a late medieval Latin version, which M. R. James suggested was created in Italy in the thirteenth century, probably to promote the cult of the relic of Mary's girdle at Prato.¹¹ In this account Thomas is presented rather differently, as the only witness of the

⁸ Because this scene does not feature the wicked delivered to hell and the blessed received in heaven, it is more accurate to describe it as the General Resurrection rather than the more conventional term, Doom.

⁹ For the twelfth-century scheme in the cathedral at Monreale, see E. Borsook, *Messages in Mosaic: the Royal Programmes of Norman Sicily, 1130–1187* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 56–79; for Giotto's fourteenth-century Arena Chapel in Padua see L. Jacobus, *Giotto and the Arena Chapel: Art, Architecture and Experience* (London, 2008), pp. 114–15, and chapter 6; for Piero della Francesca's fifteenth-century Arezzo chapel, see M. A. Lavin, *Piero della Francesca* (London, 2002), pp. 176–80. All three construe complex connections between the images pictured on the walls of the buildings in two as well as in three dimensions, and all are designed with a view to how these spaces were used by their human occupants.

¹⁰ The 'Soissons Diptych' in London (V.&A. 211–1865) of the late thirteenth century follows the story of Christ's Passion from the betrayal in the bottom left-hand corner in a zigzag sequence to Pentecost in the top right-hand corner.

¹¹ M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1924) pp. 216–18.



Fig. 3. Death of the Virgin narrative (south wall). (*Photograph by author.*)

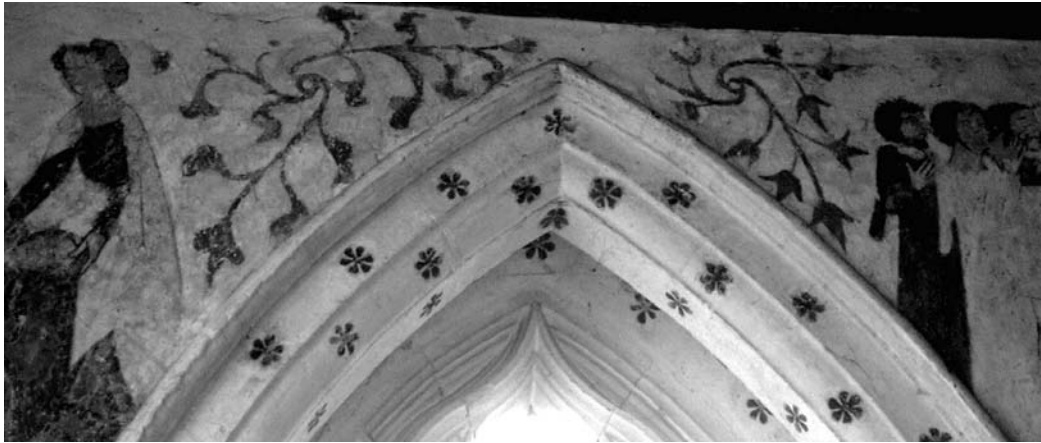


Fig. 4. Vegetal motif above south east window. (Photograph by author.)

Bodily Assumption, which he proves to the other Apostles by showing them the girdle. Whether this version was circulated in England or not is hard to say. It is problematic, because at Chalgrove it is out of sequence, coming before the main episode of Thomas witnessing the Assumption and receiving the girdle on the east wall, and this and the next scene could be seen as space-filling exercises, so that the eastern wall could be devoted entirely to the upward movement of the Assumption account (Fig. 5). Again the bottom scene may indeed be the Apostles at the empty tomb, who go there to verify for themselves the truth of Thomas's story, as Heath-Whyte has suggested, though this has no literary source.¹² In the original thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*, however, which was widely available in Latin in fourteenth-century England, the Thomas story is told twice, and the second account (about an unnamed Apostle, but Thomas is the obvious candidate) describes him demanding of the other Apostles that he should see inside the tomb so that he can believe that the body has indeed gone.¹³ If the bottom scene showed this, then it is more likely that the scene above is from the same *Golden Legend* narrative, in which Thomas comes to the Apostles at the house of John the Apostle in Ephesus, which is where he demands to see the empty tomb. There is no mention of the Apostles being at supper in the Italian account, but there is a reference to the domestic setting of the event in the *Golden Legend* which would explain the Apostles gathered round a table. It would be odd also to draw from a legend in which Thomas is shown as a believer in one episode and from a different legend in which he is shown as an unbeliever in the other. These two *Golden Legend* episodes, with the other *Golden Legend* Assumption episode featuring Thomas and the girdle on the east wall, verify the truth of the Bodily Assumption, and function as a visual preface to the event itself. They should be seen as didactic rather than narrative. On the other hand, neither of the south-wall images survive elsewhere in English art, and although the girdle does appear as an attribute of the Assumption scene or as an attribute of St Thomas himself, it does not appear as part of a more extended narrative.¹⁴

¹² Heath-Whyte, *Illustrated Guide*, p. 72.

¹³ The *Golden Legend* makes scant reference to the Thomas and the girdle episode and quickly moves on to question its authenticity. See J.-B. M. Roze, *La Légende dorée*, 2 vols (Paris, 1967), 2, p. 91. The empty tomb story features much later (p. 104) as part of an account attributed to St Cosmas, presumably Cosmas Vestitor.

¹⁴ In western art the belt appears as an attribute of Thomas as early as the twelfth century, as on the marble tympanum from Cabestany in the Pyrenees: see M. Castiñeiras and J. Camps, eds, *El romànic i la Mediterrània. Catalunya, Toulouse I Pisa 1120–1180* (Barcelona, 2008), pp. 336–7. In English fourteenth-century art there is an example in the east window of Gloucester Cathedral. In Assumption scenes probably its earliest appearance is in a twelfth-century fresco at Spoleto: see



Fig. 5. Assumption sequence (east wall). (*Photograph by author.*)



Fig. 6. Detail of head from scene largely obliterated by a memorial (south-east wall). (Photograph by author.)

The burial scene, which is virtually obliterated by the later memorial, could also be considered in a different light. A face is visible on the east side of the memorial plaque, bearded and with golden hair, and depicted with the same profile as Christ is in the death-bed scene (Fig. 6). There is no halo, but elsewhere in the paintings that attribute has sometimes disappeared, as in the figure of Christ in the enthronement scene. Looking closer to home at late medieval English sources, it may be significant to note that in both Mirk's *Festial* and in the *Play of the Assumption* in the N-Town sequence, which was written down in the mid-fifteenth century, one passage from the *Golden Legend* which is taken up and emphasized is the joining of Mary's soul to her body by Christ and St Michael prior to her being assumed into heaven. That Mary went to heaven 'body and soul' is emphasized in both texts, and it was no doubt seen as an important doctrinal point to emphasize.¹⁵ It is anyway a possible alternative suggestion for this invisible scene. Whatever the truth is, these bottom images on the south and north-east sections of the wall represent the nadir of the double sequence which is going on to right and left on the north and south walls. Then there is a kind of visual U-bend, as the viewer turns to the bottom of the east wall and follows the narrative upwards on either side, from the Harrowing of Hell (a hopeful event in a low place) to Christ ascending upwards towards heaven at the top, to the north, and the Virgin, witnessed by Thomas, herself ascending and being crowned in heaven to the south. The emotional ups and

G. Kaftal, *The Iconography of the Saints in Central and Southern Italian Painting* (Florence, 1965), pp. 1080–2. In English fourteenth-century art it appears in the Assumption scene in the De Lisle Hours, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS G.50, fol. 162v, and on the *opus anglicanum* cope now in Pienza, in Tuscany.

¹⁵ Roze, *La Légende dorée*, p. 91. This passage precedes the brief mention of the Thomas legend and its denunciation as apocryphal. T. Erbe, ed., *Mirk's Festial*, part 1, *EETS*, extra series, 96 (1905), p. 224; S. Spector, ed., *The N-Town Play*, 2 vols, *EETS*, supplementary series, 11 (1991), 1, pp. 387–409, at p. 408.

downs of the stories are therefore reflected in their position in the overall scheme (Plates 2 and 3). Not only do these narratives mirror each other in their move from east to west and up and down, but also to an extent they reflect the movement of the human users of the chancel, whose liturgical progress moves from west to east and culminates in the raising of the Host at the altar between the Ascension-Assumption sequences on either side. The visual programme at Chalgrove should perhaps be thought of as just as much a theatrical backcloth to be apprehended as a sequence to be looked at or contemplated.

This flexible use of a surface for layering meaning and connections upon a sequence of images is a common device in other media of the period. An example which draws on similar imagery to the Chalgrove paintings is the Syon Cope in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. This elaborate vestment, usually dated to the first two decades of the fourteenth century, was created as a chasuble or conical cope, but has been recut to make a conventional cope.¹⁶ There are two scenes from the *Transitus* sequence (the overall name given to the legends associated with the Virgin's death and assumption) depicted in an unusual manner – the deathbed, with Christ and an angel descending towards the Virgin, is in one frame, and the funerary procession, with the attack on the bier and Assumption of the Virgin, in another (Plate 4). The small naked Virgin in this frame implies the assumption of her soul, although the presence in the scene of the detail of the girdle falling down to St Thomas indicates that her bodily assumption is also suggested. Although we can no longer see it as it would have been worn originally, nevertheless what remains still shows us a typical fourteenth-century way of making visual connections. Both scenes are interlinked with the Coronation of the Virgin, which is placed between them, and so in its visual positioning represents the heart of the narrative rather than its culmination. On the other side both are linked with scenes which do not belong to the *Transitus* narrative, but do draw out doctrinal points which emphasize the physicality of both Christ's Resurrection and the Virgin's Assumption and the connections between them, and ultimately touch on the central tenets of Christian belief. The scenes in question are the 'touch me' and 'don't touch me' episodes in John's gospel. Next to the Assumption image, the resurrected Christ tells Mary Magdalen not to touch him because he is 'not yet ascended to my Father' (John 20:17), whilst next to the deathbed Christ invites Thomas to 'reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side' (John 20:27). So the Virgin's physical death is linked to a scene which demonstrates Christ's physical resurrection, and her assumption into heaven with the emphasis on her soul is linked to a scene which highlights Christ's divine as opposed to his human nature. Christ's two natures are paralleled with the Virgin's spiritual and bodily assumptions. The presence of Thomas in two of the scenes, doubting the bodily assumption and the physical resurrection, also makes a moralizing point on the nature of Christian faith. If this is not exactly the theological point being made, then surely something of this kind explains the arrangement of these images and the adaptation of the established iconography of the *Transitus* scenes. In a similar way, bodily assumption and bodily resurrection are visually linked at Chalgrove by being adjacent to each other on either side of the east window.

It is almost the skewing of tradition in the Syon cope and the stuttering flow of the narrative at Chalgrove that demonstrate that efforts are being made to maintain this rich nexus of connections. This is apparent in the 'treading water' exercise with the *Transitus* story, by putting in extra episodes to hold back or even invert the narrative, so that the Assumption can chime in with the Resurrection and Ascension. It can also be discerned in the imposition of the betrayal scene above the Jesse Tree, which throws out the symmetry with the General Resurrection opposite, but at least provides room to maximize the scenes of Christ's torments, so that the representation of blood and physical suffering which are another preoccupation of the scheme, as suggested below, can be shown to the full.

¹⁶ V.&A., 83–1864. For a reproduction and description see P. Williamson, ed., *The Medieval Treasury. The Art of the Middle Ages in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London, 1986), pp. 190–1.

The narratives on the east wall culminate with scenes which focus on the figure of the Virgin. The Ascension, depicted as Christ's feet disappearing into the clouds, appears at a point where opposite there would have been angels censuring the scene of the Coronation.¹⁷ (Plates 5a and 5b). His Ascension is therefore linked up across the window with images which form merely a framing device for the main scene on the south side of the window. Opposite the Coronation itself the Apostles gather to witness the Ascension, with the Virgin at their centre, her hands joined in prayer, as they are in the scene opposite, where she is crowned by her son. That a strong Marian element permeates all the images and not just those exclusively dedicated to her life is not surprising. Mary is the patron saint of the church, and her Assumption is the event which the dedication celebrates. Although it is hard to assess the distribution of church dedications in the pre-Reformation period, given that many were changed in the wake of that event, it is interesting that of only forty-seven surviving Assumption dedications in England, seventeen are in the modern diocese of Oxford.¹⁸ *Transitus* images are indeed clustered in the area – with late thirteenth-century and fourteenth-century examples surviving at nearby Beckley and North Moreton (where they appear in a chantry chapel attached to the church), and only a little further afield in the nave at Croughton and in the chancel at Broughton, near Banbury. All of them, with the possible exception of Croughton, feature the episode with Thomas and the girdle, which led Peter Newton to speculate on the influence of the presence of a relic of this girdle at Westminster Abbey on the iconography of the period.¹⁹ Like Broughton and Beckley, the dedication of Chalgrove to the Assumption must certainly explain the presence of these stories in the chancel. As noted above, hagiographical cycles depicting the lives of the Church's patron saints were relatively common in chancel programmes. However, the Virgin stars in nearly all the episodes depicted, and not just the narrative on the south wall. She is at the centre of the Jesse Tree, she is (obviously) in the childhood episodes, and she also appears in the procession to Calvary (as she also does at Croughton), the Crucifixion, Deposition, Entombment, and Ascension. Most of this is iconographically normal, but it is worth remembering that, with the exception of John's account of the Crucifixion, none of her appearances in the Passion sequence is canonical.

A glance at contemporary writing and visual culture would suggest that Mary's presence can be explained by factors other than simply her being associated with the church's dedication. In the universal narrative of salvation, the Virgin is at the beginning and the end. At the entrance and exit of the chancel she appears with Christ as a child in the midst of the Jesse Tree and with Christ raising his hands as judge and Saviour in the scene of the General Resurrection (Plates 6 and 7). Not only is she deployed as a symbol of continuation between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfilment in the Jesse Tree, but she also symbolizes the Incarnation by holding the Christ child in her arms. This relationship of nurturing mother and dependent human child is echoed in the General Resurrection opposite, where she exposes her breast to her adult son, reminding him and the viewer of his human nature. This is not, however, just a Christological statement, it also – and this is important for one of the functions of the Chalgrove chancel – underscores the Virgin's power as intercessor; she symbolizes Christ's humanity and therefore predisposition to be merciful, and, as his mother, is someone who may be deemed to be powerful as a petitioner to her son as judge. If the images which link these two episodes together in a three-dimensional sequence are read as two swags of narrative in which the north side links the Jesse Tree with the Ascension, and the Coronation links the *Transitus* narrative with the General Resurrection, then it can be seen that the narratives are suspended from episodes which focus on the Christ/Virgin relationship – Incarnation in the Jesse Tree, the Virgin as *Ecclesia* left to continue

¹⁷ Angels censuring this scene are very common and can be seen in other contemporary English examples, such as the nave wall paintings in St Albans Cathedral and the *opus anglicanum* cope in the cathedral treasury at St Bertrand-de-Comminges in the Pyrenees.

¹⁸ K. E. Kirk, *Church Dedications in the Oxford Diocese* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 67–87.

¹⁹ P. A. Newton, *The County of Oxford: a Catalogue of Medieval Stained Glass* (Oxford, 1979), p. 30.

Christ's work after his Ascension, the triumph of humanity/*Ecclesia*, as Christ crowns his human mother physically present in heaven, and the balance of mercy and judgement, as the merciful Virgin tempers the impartiality of her son as judge.²⁰

All so-called Marian art of the medieval period focuses on this relationship. Until the emergence of the image of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception at the end of the Middle Ages, all main iconographic types show her in some relationship with Christ – either actual, as in Virgin and Child, Pietà, and Coronation groups, or implied, as in Annunciation and Assumption scenes. Late medieval lyrics celebrate her in the same way, particularly emphasizing the essential event of the Incarnation for the future redemption of humankind. This fifteenth-century lyric will serve as an example:

Moder, if thou thy sone will pray
That never no sawll sall be sshente,
Fforsothe thy sone will noght saye naye
It was his awen commaundement
He will be buxome to thee aye
Ffor in thy worschep wome he went.

(Mother, if you will pray to your son that no soul will be ruined, thy son will forsooth not say no. After all, it was his own commandment (that is, to honour one's father and mother). He will be kind to you because you carried him in your womb).²¹

The way the programme is ordered is related to how it was witnessed. The liturgical interaction with the images has already been referred to, but many participants in a fourteenth-century mass would have had a very passive experience of it. Clearly with its many surviving recesses for the storage and washing of items associated with the performance of the sacrament, both in the chancel itself and in the south aisle, Chalgrove like any late medieval parish church was well equipped for the performance of masses at a number of altars (Fig. 7). The Goodman of Paris, writing towards the end of the century, instructs his young wife when going to Mass to find an image on an altar to contemplate in a quiet and secluded corner, and also to concentrate on her book – one assumes her primer or some such private prayer book – and to do this every day as she attends Mass.²² The passage implies that the young woman's experience at Mass was a private one in which she attended to her personal devotions, except at that point where she would look up to witness the Elevation. In this particular church the Elevation would be flanked by strongly Marian focused images, but again it can be demonstrated that this high point of the Eucharist should not necessarily be expected to focus on the single person of Christ. A fourteenth-century prayer at the Elevation opens with a tribute to Mary as the one who enabled God to become human and goes on to ask that the devotee might find salvation through her merciful intercession.²³

The emphasis on blood in the Passion sequence has been noted and is not uncommon for the period.²⁴ Christ's blood, after all, was a valued relic, and meditations on his Passion were

²⁰ An indication of the ongoing connection between the Virgin and *Ecclesia* in art of the period can be seen in a book of hours, BL, MS Egerton 2781, fol. 17, in which Mary-*Ecclesia* appears with the Apostles. For a general survey of the Virgin as *Ecclesia* see M-L Thèrel, *A l'origine du décor du portail occidental de Notre Dame: la triomphe de la Vierge-Eglise. Sources historiques, littéraires et iconographiques* (Paris, 1984).

²¹ Carleton Brown, *Religious Lyrics of the Fifteenth Century*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1952), p. 31.

²² Eileen Power, ed. and trans., *The Goodman of Paris. A Treatise on Moral and Domestic Economy by a Citizen of Paris, c.1393* (Woodbridge, 2006), p. 39.

²³ C. Horstmann, ed., *Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, part 1, *EETS*, os 98 (1892), p. 25.

²⁴ Heath-Whyte, *Illustrated Guide*, p. 22.



Fig. 7. Recesses in east wall behind present altar. (Photograph by author.)

popular in Latin and vernacular literature.²⁵ The clergy sitting in the sedilia opposite, including the priests whose special privilege was to participate in the consecrated cup of wine transubstantiated into Christ's blood, would have been faced on the north wall with a series of images of the suffering and dying Christ, where the blood, miraculously to appear again in the sacrament of the Eucharist, was historically shed for the first time. Here, too, contemporary literature reinforces the physicality of medieval devotion and the deeply felt impact of the literal partaking of Christ's human nature. The fourteenth-century Vernon manuscript furnishes useful examples. A lyric entitled 'St Bernard's Lamentation on Christ's Passion' describes the saint's encounter with the Virgin in a church, where he asks her about her response to Christ's suffering. She reports how she was present at every stage of the Passion story and describes the streams of blood running down Christ's side, the 4,500 wounds with which he was inflicted at the flagellation, and how blood even ran out of her own eyes.²⁶ In the sequence of paintings human blood is also present and implied in the General Resurrection scene, where Christ shows his bleeding wounds, and Mary exposes her breast swollen with the milk which, in medieval thinking, was understood to be reconstituted human blood (Plate 7).²⁷

²⁵ See Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 19–45. In the visual arts Christ's five wounds are, for instance, gilded and presented like flowers on the fourteenth-century Röttgen *pietà* in Bonn; Christ's wounds venerated by angels appears in two English manuscripts of the Bohun group from later in the fourteenth century: Pommersfelden, Gräfl. Schönbornische Bibliothek, MS 2934, fol.9v; and Bodl. MS Auct. D.4.4., fol. 236v.

²⁶ *Minor Poems of the Vernon Manuscript*, p. 297.

²⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 132–3.

These details provide opportunities for prayerful contemplation as well as being appropriate for the liturgical purpose of the space. There are other features of the arrangement of the images which appear to prompt a devotional response. In its programme, which moves from childhood to Passion to *Transitus* imagery, and which includes standing images of saints as well as the free-standing representations of the Jesse Tree and the General Resurrection, the Chalgrove paintings can also be considered as a single sequence. The increasingly popular books of hours or primers might include all these elements. The Hours of the Virgin, for instance, in MS Douce 431, in the Bodleian, which dates from between 1325 and 1330, are introduced by scenes from all three narratives – childhood, Passion, and *Transitus* – and the volume opens with a series of diptychs of standing saints, including Sts Peter and Paul, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, and Mary Magdalen and Helen, all of whom appear as pairs at Chalgrove at the east end of the chancel. The two western pairs, Annunciation on one side and Sts Lawrence and Bartholomew on the other, might be explained more in terms of the passing of the Christian year, since they are associated temporally with the scenes they introduce. The Spring feast of the Annunciation introduces chronologically the childhood cycle and calendrically the Passion cycle. The continuation of the story of salvation from the Jesse Tree straight into the childhood cycle features locally in fourteenth-century programmes, such as the new Lady Chapel at St Helen's, in Abingdon, where the Jesse culminates in the Annunciation, in which Christ appears crucified on the lily growing in a pot between Gabriel and the Virgin, and on the north side of the high altar at Dorchester Abbey, where the story of the nativity is told in the lower branches of the Jesse Tree (Plate 8). The saints opposite, on the south-west side, at Chalgrove are saints of the Assumption season. Indeed, in Mirk's sequence of festival sermons St Lawrence immediately precedes the Assumption, and St Bartholomew immediately follows it.²⁸

We do not know who dictated the programme at Chalgrove, although we might assume that either or all of the patrons involved – the Barentins, who were the lords of Warborough, and the de Plessis families, and the Cistercian community at Thame would have been consulted.²⁹ The abbey at Thame was not one which enjoyed a reputation for erudition in the fourteenth century, but some features of the scheme suggest Cistercian involvement. The dialogue between St Bernard and the Virgin emanated from a Cistercian milieu, and the blood of Christ had a particular resonance with this monastic order, especially in the West country since, from the 1270s, the Cistercians had been the custodians of one of the most precious relics on English soil – a phial of the blood of Christ, which was venerated at Hailes Abbey, in Gloucestershire. A late thirteenth-century book of *exempla* for preachers, the *Speculum Laicorum*, even includes a story about a Cistercian saved from damnation by a drop of Christ's blood.³⁰ Ecclesiastical concerns more generally seem to dictate the fortunes of the resurrected depicted on the north-west wall, where the vast majority of figures wear church regalia of some kind.

On the other hand, another function of the chancel seems to have been as some kind of commemorative space, at least for the Barentin family. Brasses which still survive on the floor, representing later generations of the family, suggest that the rebuilding of the chancel was conducted with the intention of setting up a permanent memorial through the generations.³¹

²⁸ *Mirk's Festial*, pp. 216, 231.

²⁹ For manorial history and the local patronage of the Barentin and de Plessis families, see John Blair, in Paul Page, Kate Atherton, and Alan Hardy, *Barentin's Manor: Excavations of the Moated Manor at Harding's Field, Chalgrove, Oxfordshire, 1976–9*, Thames Valley Landscape Monograph, OAU (2005), pp. 9–14, at p. 13; for Thame Abbey in the late Middle Ages see *VCH Oxon*, 2, p. 84.

³⁰ J. T. Welter, ed., *Speculum Laicorum* (Paris, 1914), p. 74. See also Catherine Oakes, 'The scales: an iconographic motif of justice, redemption and intercession', *Maria, a Journal of Marian Studies*, 1 (2000), pp. 10–36, at p. 25.

³¹ A list of 1480 says Sir Drew Barentin II and his successors were buried in the chancel 'under marble stones': Report of the Oxford Archaeological Society (1902), p. 32. For the fifteenth-century memorial brasses of the Barentin family visible in the chancel, Jennifer Sherwood and Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Oxfordshire* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 526.



Fig. 8. Inscription over the Harrowing of Hell (east wall). (Photograph by author.)

The inscriptions on the east wall seem to be an invocation to the Virgin to intercede with Christ her son for the souls of the patrons, the lords of Warborough. From their content they must be assumed to be pre-Reformation inscriptions, although probably later than the paintings themselves because of the way they cut through the images behind them (Fig. 8).³² The imagery, however, seems to have influenced the positioning of the words, with the appeal for intercession over the Marian scene of the Assumption, and the plea to Christ for mercy, for which the Virgin will be the ambassador, over the scene of the Harrowing, where Christ shows off his power to release souls from hell. The Virgin's merciful embassy is even envisaged above her Assumption, where she is enthroned with Christ and turns towards him, her hands in a petitionary gesture.³³ The Barentin patronage of the rebuilding, the presence of the later brasses, the strong intercessory tone of the iconography, all suggest that one of the functions of this new structure was to provide a space in which masses could be said on a daily basis in perpetuity on behalf of the patrons. Just

³² The inscription over the Harrowing of Hell reads 'Orat ... Jesu animabus dominorum Wabor'. The only word decipherable over the Assumption scene is 'Maria', but some kind of petitionary prayer would seem likely: see Heath-Whyte, *Illustrated Guide*, p. 76.

³³ This petitionary gesture is common in fourteenth-century scenes of her coronation or enthronement: see Catherine Oakes, *Ora Pro Nobis: the Virgin as Intercessor in Late Medieval Art and Devotion* (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 82–8.

a few miles away a model for such an intercessory machine had already been set up a few decades previously by Sir Miles Stapleton at North Moreton, where a chantry had been founded in the 1290s and the south aisle remodelled for the purpose, including a sequence of *Transitus* imagery in the east window (Plate 9).

A final thought on the contemporary reception of the Chalgrove chancel is connected with local identity. The Assumption dedication was not just significant for the church alone, but the period of the celebration of this high-ranking holy day was also the time when the village feast took place.³⁴ The presence of other saints in the new chancel who were celebrated through this season, as well as the *Transitus* themes themselves, would have reminded local people of the happy coincidence between holy days and holidays. With the lives of ordinary people we come to the hazy perimeter of the subject which has been the focus of this essay, and so little more of substance can be said. An attempt has been made to sketch in a context and therefore to give a shape to the Chalgrove paintings and their audience in the fourteenth century. Whether they were exceptional in their time cannot be definitively affirmed. Their complex arrangement may simply be to do with their completeness – other parochial schemes may once have been equally multi-layered in their treatment. Certainly there are parallels between the Chalgrove programme and the arrangement of images in devotional books of the period, which leads to the hesitant suggestion for further thought that, with Oxford just down the road, the source of the design may lie with an Oxford atelier or even an Oxford scholar. However, they are special in terms of their survival, and they demonstrate the inventiveness of fourteenth-century painters, designers, and thinkers in manipulating a mode of communication not only in two, but in three, dimensions around a body of space to maximize its potential for stimulating the human mind.

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³⁴ Kirk, *Church Dedications*, p. 12.



Plate 1. St Mary the Virgin, Chalgrove, general view of chancel looking east.
(*Photograph by author.*) [Oakes, p. 19.]



Plate 2. Passion and Resurrection sequence in north-east corner of chancel. (*Photograph by author.*) [Oakes, p. 28.]



Plate 3. Burial and Assumption sequence in south-east corner of chancel. (*Photograph by author.*) [Oakes, p. 28.]



Plate 4. *Transitus* episodes from the Syon Cope (Copyright Victoria and Albert Museum: V.&A. 3-1864.) [Oakes, p. 28.]



Plates 5a and 5b. Ascension and Coronation scenes opposite each other on either side of the east window.
(Photograph by author.) [Oakes, p. 29.]



Plate 6. Virgin and child on Jesse Tree (north wall).
(*Photograph by author.*) [Oakes, p. 29.]



Plate 7. Interceding Virgin with Christ above the General Resurrection
(south wall). (*Photograph by author.*) [Oakes, p. 29.]



Plate 8. Adoration of the Magi from Jesse Tree window in tracery
on the north side of the chancel at Dorchester Abbey, c.1340.
(*Photograph by author.*) [Oakes, p. 31.]



Plate 9. *Transitus* sequence (on right) from east window of Stapleton chantry, North Moreton (late thirteenth century).
(*Photograph by author.*) [Oakes, p. 32.]