

## The angel-musicians in St Nicholas, Kings Lynn

The roof angels are a mixture of musicians and those carrying liturgical attributes. While, if they remain in their original locations, they would seem to be distributed fairly randomly in the bays, the sole example of the synchronisation of two angels on either side, in bays 6 and 7, would seem to divide the others into two deliberate groups.

The “dividing” angels are distinctly female, and are both in more decorative costume than many of the others. Three of them have crowns. The two in bay 6 each wear delicate kirtles and a heavy bejewelled girdle, with the right arm outstretched, having clearly carried some sort of staff. Those in bay 7 carry books. Medieval angelology detailed Nine Orders of angels, subdivided into three tiers. It is tentatively suggested that these are higher-ranking angels than those in the main groups. The senior angels of the lowest tier, called *Principalities*, are described as being of greater beauty, and are often depicted with crowns and carrying sceptres. They were responsible for the good order of the lower angels. Those at the head of the middle tier were called *Dominations*, and were responsible for the dissemination of the Word of God. Such function might be depicted in the Lynn angels by the books they carry. The pairs of angels dividing the main groups might thus be seen as in a supervisory role over the remainder.

Within the eastern group of angels in bays 8 to 12 are three musicians. Several of the eastern angels have lost their attributes, but from the broken carvings at the points where hands or attributes were attached, none of them looks to have been an additional musician. The western group in bays 1 to 5 contains six musicians. However, within this group are several mid-Victorian carvings, often roughly executed. There can be no certainty that they are attempts at copies of medieval musicians, although in one case some features of the instrument suggests sight of an early original.

In the thirteenth century music was often divided according to timbres into “high” and “low” groupings. This referred not to the pitch of the instruments, but to the volume of the sound. The musicians in the eastern group are all playing soft instruments: bay 10 N has a left-handed lute; bay 11 N is playing a psaltery; while bay 9 S has a large well-carved lute. Those in the western group which are original figures have loud instruments: bay 2 N has a small lute, with detailed carving; bay 4 S, while no longer in possession of an instrument, nevertheless has the remains of a dowel in the mouth, with slight bulges round the lips, and the positioning of the hands suggest that a trumpet mouthpiece was attached at the dowel, the tube and bell supported by the hands. The enlarged diameter of the hole described by thumb and fingers at the lower hand indicates a gradual taper of the bore. On the north side in bay 5 is a tabor-player. The drum was clearly in two parts, and only the disc closest to the body has survived. This was worn attached to crossed straps, and the hands are in a position to have steadied the drum with one, while holding a beater in the other. The angel in bay 4 N was also a musician who has again lost her instrument. She is clearly female, with a decorated head-band and elaborate curly hair. Her mouth has a drilling for a dowel of the same size as that of the trumpeter in bay 4 S, but she has lost

both hands just above the wrists. Nevertheless, while the arms are more or less level, one hand could easily have been positioned above and one below an instrument which was held vertically down against the chest. This could well have been a simple pipe, a frequent accompaniment to the tabor of her eastern neighbour.

Sadly the recorder-player in bay 5 S, often cited as the earliest depiction of that instrument, is Victorian. But there is an interesting feature in the profile of the turning of the instrument, bearing in mind that this was carved before the revival of the recorder in modern times. The fipple is conical, and its maximum diameter exceeds the diameter of the main tube at the labium. Two surviving recorders discovered in the last 30 years in Germany, dating from the 14th century, also have a conical end for the fipple and the section above the finger-holes, but the labium is within that conical section. Since the Victorian carvers could have known almost nothing about the recorder, and medieval examples from later centuries in Europe have no such larger top section, it is just possible that the Victorians were copying a much-damaged earlier carving, but failed to get the sections in proportion. The 4-stringed gittern-player in bay 2 S is also Victorian, and the depiction is very rudimentary.

Much of the medieval carving is exemplary. Both the lute-players in bay 2 N and bay 9 S are using a quill plectrum, common in that period. The number of courses shown on the lutes is a bit approximate, but great care has been taken in depicting the peg-boxes. The lutenist in bay 2 N has a very detailed peg-box for 11 strings, although only 4 courses are shown at the neck. Yet across the sound-hole and bridge there are many more strings carved. The lute-playing angel in bay 9 S also has many strings shown across the front of the instrument, with the left hand in a very creditable attitude to stop the strings. The carver was clearly a close observer of lutenists. The peg-box has no pegs visible, but the courses are shown going to 4 clear groups of pegs either side of the box, thus implying a 4-course lute, common for the time.

The psaltery has 11 exquisitely carved courses (pairs of strings) with the bridge shown very accurately.

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