

The Doom Painting – some thoughts on its significance

The Rev'd Dr Allan Barton *is an independent art historian and lecturer, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. Here, he sheds light on the meaning and significance of medieval Doom paintings.*

One of the primary images in English parish churches on the cusp of the Reformation was the great Rood, a Crucifix with accompanying figures of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St John. The Rood was invariably placed on a beam under the arch that formed the threshold between two spaces in the church building, the nave, where the people gathered for worship and the chancel that contained the high altar at which the Mass was celebrated. You could argue that this threshold was a liminal point that symbolised where earth and heaven met. Below the Rood and supporting it, was a screen and a loft, the screen was of openwork, a series of windows that framed the action of the Mass taking place in the chancel. To the medieval mind the Mass was a re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross at which Christ became truly present on the altar in the offerings of bread and wine. It made perfect sense, for the lay person at Mass to see in front of them a large representation of the sacrifice of Christ, to reinforce a sacramental and sacrificial understanding of the Mass.

The rood was not an image set in isolation, it was often part of a larger tableau that gave the cross not only an appropriate visual backdrop, but set both the rood and the Mass, in a particular theological context. It is this tableau, its form and how it functioned in relation to rood and the Mass, that I want to explore in this article.

In many cases the tableau that backed the rood was what we term a 'Doom' painting, a word that derives from the Old English word *dom*, which mean '*the administration of justice*' or '*judgement*.' What the Doom portrays is the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgement. The Doom was either painted on the wall directly above the Rood and chancel arch, sometimes spilling out panoramically onto the north or south walls of the nave – or on a series of boards called a tympanum, which fitted into the chancel arch. Several Doom paintings on walls above chancel arches remain – most in very faded or fragmentary form, with about a dozen or so being complete or visually satisfying – they were found again in the 19th or early 20th century, emerging under numerous layers of Protestant limewash. Of those painted on boards or tympana, five or six now remain. Each representation of the Doom is unique and has distinct deviations in iconography, far too many for a short article like this to address – and so, as I explore the iconography of the Doom, I will focus on just one, the Doom tympanum at Wenhaston in Suffolk (Fig. 1), as it incorporates within it



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Doom tymanum at Wenhaston
in Suffolk

Christ at the top left hand of the
panel seated on a rainbow

Mary and St John the Baptist
praying for mankind

all the standard themes found in Doom paintings. This Doom was discovered by chance in 1892; it had been discarded in the churchyard and when rain began to wash off the layers of limewash the colour began to appear.

The scriptural source for the Doom's imagery is the 25th chapter of St Matthew's Gospel, wherein Christ talks to his disciples about the 'eschaton' the last things. Christ says that '*the Son of Man,*' by which he means himself, will '*come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.*' At Wenhaston, the scenes based on Matthew 25, are a painted around the place where the Rood once was, with its figures of Mary and John the Evangelist, now shown as a shadowy outline. We see Christ at the top left hand of the panel seated on a rainbow (Fig. 2), which is of course a symbol of God's covenant, his promise to be faithful to his people after the flood in Genesis – Jesus is the fulfilment of that promise. This figure is of the resurrected, ascended, and glorified Christ, still bears the wounds of the cross on his hands, feet, and side. To his right are his mother Mary and St John the Baptist (Fig. 3), who are praying for mankind. Below them you can see figures of people in their shrouds rising from their tombs, in readiness for judgement.

Jesus says in Matthew 25 that when he comes again, the nations will be gathered before him and that he will separate them as a shepherd separates sheep from goats – he will set the sheep on his right and the goats on the left. The blessed will inherit the kingdom prepared for them and the damned will depart to the everlasting fire prepared for the devil. The primary purpose of the Doom is to show that process. By tradition St Michael the archangel has a role in this, and we see him (Fig. 4), sword in hand, weighing in a pair of scales a soul, while a demon contends for it. To the left of the panel, the right of Christ, we see St Peter dressed as a pope and holding a large key (Fig. 5), the key to heaven given to him by Christ, welcoming a group of the saved. At Wenhaston the saved are an important group of people, we have a king, queen, bishop, and cardinal. Often on Doom paintings the rich and powerful are usually being dragged away to hell, indicating that status did not allow you to escape Christ's judgement. Further along we see souls entering paradise (Fig. 6), portrayed as a walled city, a reference to the description of heaven a holy city and New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. On the other side of the panel (Fig. 7), we see the fate of the damned, they are entering hell, what is termed 'Gehenna' in the Greek New Testament, represented as a great monster with a gaping mouth. At the top, a demon sounds a horn, while next to him another carts a woman into hell over his shoulders. Below a great chain keeps more souls in, while another demon manages the entrance and keeps control with a grappling hook. Again and again in Matthew's gospel Jesus refers to Gehenna as a place where there will be '*wailing and gnashing of teeth*' and this great maw of hell at Wenhaston has a prize set of teeth.

What then is the purpose of a Doom painting? The general interpretation is that these images were intended to invoke fear and compliance – that the



St Michael the archangel,
sword in hand, weighing in a
pair of scales a soul
Souls entering paradise,
portrayed as a walled city



St Peter dressed as a pope
and holding a large key
The fate of the damned
entering hell



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images of hell and damnation were designed primarily to teach of the eternal perils of sin and to keep people in their place. This is over-simplistic; the Doom is intended to instruct people of the positive as well as the negative consequences of their action towards others. Christ makes it clear in Matthew 25 that at his coming on the last day, the people will be judged according to how they cared for one another, particularly their care for the most unfortunate and vulnerable in society. Christ himself says in Matthew 25 – that those who will be saved (the sheep), are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, visited the sick & visited prisoners. Those that performed what the medieval mind called the ‘Corporal Acts of Mercy,’ for in doing that, he says, they were serving him. Those who are sent away from the presence of God to Gehenna, are those who do not do those things.

It is also important to note, that the placement of the Doom and the Rood together is an intentional conjunction, the two create a unified iconography. The Rood gives meaning to the Doom and the Doom to the Rood – and both provide a visual context for an understanding of what occurs in the Mass. The Rood is an icon of Christ’s first coming in the flesh, which is God’s fulfilment of his faithfulness represented by the rainbow. He fulfilled that promise, the Christian faith teaches, by sending his Son, to take on our flesh and die, so that those faithful to him might have a new and eternal life. The Doom is an icon of the eschaton, of Christ’s second coming, and to the medieval mind the second coming of Christ is the moment in which the effect of the cross takes place and when the promise of new life is fulfilled. Medieval people had a worldview that was sacramentally focused, and they would have recognised in the Mass, a further coming of Christ. During the celebration of the Mass the body and blood of Christ was made manifest, and Christ became present with his people in their daily lives. The highpoint of the sacrifice of the Mass was the elevation of the host (the body of Christ) after its consecration – the medieval worshipper seeing the host through the Rood screen, viewing it with the Rood and Doom in eyeshot, would have seen laid before them the whole history of salvation. It was powerful stuff.