Fig 1: Stone slab from St. Paul’s Church Yard, carved in Anglo-Scandinavian ‘Ringerike’ style with a lion and a serpent in battle.

(Photo: The Museum of London)

Saint Erkenwald: Bishop and London Archaeologist

JOHN CLARK

ACCORDING TO THE Shorter Oxford English Dictionary the word “archaeology” was not used before 1607, and there were no “archaeologists” until the 19th century; yet the archaeological approach to history and an interest in the physical remains of the past, the evidence for the practical achievements of earlier generations of mankind, existed long before either of those dates. The Anglo-Saxons were well aware of the ruins of a previous civilization, which surrounded them; the well-known poem on The Ruin¹ by an Anglo-Saxon writer describes what seem to be the remains of a Roman city, perhaps Bath, attributing them poetically to “the work of giants” and drawing

Fig 2: The shrine of St. Erkenwald in Old St. Paul's Cathedral; the engraving by Wenceslaus Hollar in William Dugdale's *The History of St. Paul's Cathedral* (London 1658).
the obvious moral that even the most glorious
products of human effort are impermanent — a
moral of course emphasized in conventional
Christian thought. The knowledge that an earlier
race had produced monuments that could not be
matched by contemporary skills was inherent in
much medieval writing — pilgrims' accounts of
the wonders of Rome for example, or the miracles
attributed to the Roman "magician" Vergil and
must have encouraged that conviction of the
fleeting nature of human life on earth and of all
material prosperity seen for example in an early
13th-century poem that begins "Where are they
that were before us, led hounds, carried hawks,
and owned field and wood?"

In the early 12th century the imposing ruins of
the Roman legionary fortress at Caerleon inspired
Geoffrey of Monmouth with visions of a noble
British city, equal in importance to London and
York, to which he assigned a leading role in his
fabricated History of the Kings of Britain. A
later 12th-century visitor to the same site, Gerald
of Wales, was equally impressed, and recognized
and described the function of the hypocaust heating
systems whose remains he saw, built with "marvel-
ous skill". Besides inspiring awe, Roman ruins
had the more utilitarian function of providing
second-hand building materials. The present struc-
ture of St. Alban's abbey reflects its builders' access
to a ready supply of Roman bricks in the
remains of the town of Verulamium, and the
"archaeological" activities of two of its abbots,
Ealdred and Eadmer, in the 11th century are
recorded. Their prime purpose was to demolish
buildings, clearly still roofed, in Roman "Warlams-
chester" that were serving as hiding-places for
"robbers, footpads and whores", but usable building
material was set aside, and mention is made of
the pottery and glass vessels, the altars, inscriptions,
statues and coins that the workmen found. The
further report that Eadmer excavated a cache of
documents relating to the life of the martyr St.
Alban himself is less believable — a typical piece
of medieval historical invention for religious pro-
paganda; the boundary between fact and specula-
tion is often blurred in medieval historical writings.

2. J. S. P. Tatlock The Legendary History of Britain
(Berkeley 1950) 374-377.
3 Ibid. 364.
4 B. Dickins and R. M. Wilson Early Middle English
Texts (London 1951) 127-128; B. Stone, trans. Medieval
English Verse (Harmondsworth 1964) 67-68.
5 Op. cit. in note 2, 69-70; Geoffrey of Monmouth,
trans. L. Thorpe The History of the Kings of Britain
(Harmondsworth 1966), references in index under
"City of the Legions", 313-314.

The earliest record of an archaeological obser-
vation relating to London or the London area
seems to be contained in the work of the first
English historian worthy of the name, Bede. In his
Ecclesiastical History of the English People Bede,
writing in the 730s, incorporated an account of
Julius Caesar's two invasions of Britain, taken
word for word from the 5th-century Roman
(actually Spanish) historian Orosius. However, to
Orosius' statement that the British defending the
Thames-crossing against Caesar's troops during his
second campaign, had fortified the river-bank and
the ford with sharp stakes, Bede added the com-
ment that remains of the stakes could still be seen,
each as thick as a man's thigh, encased in lead and
fixed firmly in the river-bed. This information Bede,
in Northumbria, must have acquired from a
southern English informant, perhaps Nothhelm,
"holy priest of the church of London", whose help in
other matters he acknowledged. Where these
stakes were, and what they were, is not clear —
though they were presumably not in fact the
remains of the purely temporary fortification
erected in haste (and surely as quickly cleared) 800
years before: the remains of a wharf, perhaps, or
some structure related to a Roman bridge, possibly
at London?

Yet, if we could believe one medieval document,
there had been an archaeological discovery in
London that caused considerable excitement 40
years or more before Bede wrote, in the days of
Erkenwald, bishop of London c. 675-693. Bede
himself wrote of the saintly bishop, founder of the
abbeys at Barking and Chertsey, and the miracles
that surrounded him in life and death. His tomb
in St. Paul's cathedral became a place of pilgrim-
age, and the magnificent shrine built in his honour
in the 14th century could still be seen by visitors
to the cathedral up to the time of the Great Fire
of 1666 (Fig. 2). As with other early saints, stories
grew of the miracles achieved by St.
Erkenwald or brought about by his relics. In these
rationalist days no historian would be prepared to
accept at their face-value these or any similar
saintly legends. The story of Erkenwald's archaeo-
logical activity is more than usually suspect in that

6 Gerald of Wales, trans. L. Thorpe The Journey
through Wales and The Description of Wales (Har-
7 T. Wright "On Antiquarian Excavations and Re-
searches in the Middle Ages" Archaeologia 30 (1844)
440-445.
8 Bede, trans. L. Sherley-Price A History of the English
Church and People (Harmondsworth 1955) 40-41.
9 Ibid. 34.
10 Ibid. 217-218.
it appears not in any authoritative Life of the saint such as the 14th-century one by John of Tynemouth, but in an English alliterative poem by a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer, written at the end of the 14th century; the poet's purpose was rather to point a moral than to make any claim to historical accuracy.

Preserved in a single copy in a late 15th-century manuscript in the British Library, St. Erkenwald was written in the same alliterative style as the more famous Gawain and the Green Knight; the identity of the writer is unknown. The story is set in the days of Bishop Erkenwald — though Erkenwald himself is away visiting his Essex diocese when it opens. Building work is under way on St. Paul's cathedral, and workmen digging foundations uncover a magnificently worked stone tomb. It bears round its edge an indecipherable inscription. In scenes reminiscent of the excitement surrounding the discovery of the Temple of Mithras in 1954, Londoners gather to gaze at the wonder. With blithe disregard of the anachronism involved the discovery of the Temple of Mithras in 1954, Londoners gather to gaze at the wonder. With blithe disregard of the anachronism involved the

Erkenwald is a legend of St. Gregory, according to which, in similar circumstances, Gregory secured the release from Hell of the soul of the virtuous Roman emperor Trajan. Why should such a story be transferred to St. Erkenwald and set with such realistic circumstantial detail in London? It might be associated with the efforts which Robert Braybrooke, bishop of London, was making in the 1380s to ensure the proper celebration at St. Paul's of St. Erkenwald's feast-days, while the continuing popularity of the saint with Londoners would provide a ready readership for the poem's rather difficult Christian message. Any story that redounded to the credit of the saint known as "the Light of London" would be welcomed.

Like the other contemporary writers on historical themes the author made little attempt to avoid anachronisms. His mayor, his mace-bearers and his beadles have no place in 7th-century London; he calls the building work on St. Paul's the New Work, a title actually applied consistently to the project to extend the Norman cathedral which was begun in the 1250s and continued well into the 14th century. The poem provides in fact a lively picture of 14th-century London, and of the reaction of a 14th-century crowd to a strange discovery. It is this contemporary vividness which suggests another possible source of inspiration.

The builders of the New Work in the 13th and 14th centuries must have disturbed earlier graves and perhaps foundations, just as Wren's work after the Great Fire revealed burials from the Roman period on and a Roman pottery kiln. We may suppose that they downed tools occasionally to gaze at some particularly unusual grave or structure. In fact this is more than supposition, for there is one record of a find in this period which caused considerable excitement at the time. It is reported by the 16th-century historians John Stow and William Camden that in about the time of Bishop Ralph Baldock (1306-1313) during building-works on the cathedral, a pit was discovered containing more than 100 ox-skulls, which those who saw them took to be the remains of pagan sacrifices. The original source of this report is obscure; neither that fact nor the use made of the report by later antiquaries to bolster the case for the existence of a (spurious) Temple of Diana on the site of St. Paul's need detract from the

The inspiration of the story here applied to

I am grateful to Miss Charlotte Everest-Phillips for drawing my attention to the existence of this poem.

12 Ibid. 19-31.
13 Ibid. 16-17.
authenticity (and significance) of the find. At the very least the poet of St. Erkenwald was writing for an audience which was aware that strange things had been found, and might be found, by digging in the ground in the vicinity of St. Paul's.

Yet could there be more? Could the writer have been inspired by a particular find? What follows can be no more than speculation — perhaps idle speculation. The pagan judge’s tomb had been inscribed, but the finders had been unable to read the inscription because it was “runish” — the word simply means “indecipherable”. We know of one monument that originally stood in or near St. Paul’s on which was an inscription that would certainly have defeated medieval attempts to read it. Part of it is in the collection of the Museum of London — a stone slab carved in 11th-century Anglo-Scandinavian style with a lion and serpent (Figs 1 & 3). On the edge is an inscription that is not only runish but runic, recording in the Old Norse runic alphabet the names of those who erected the monument (Fig. 3); the slab probably formed part of a cist or tomb-chest. When the surviving stone was found in 1852 it was apparently not in situ. Between the 11th century, when it was carved, and its 19th-century discovery the tomb had been disturbed. This might have happened during the rebuilding began after the fire which destroyed the Saxon cathedral in 1087, during the construction of the New Work, or during minor building operations on the cathedral or in the cathedral precincts; if it had come to light during Wren’s work in the 17th century it seems likely that some antiquary would have taken note of it. It is not impossible that this monument, or something like it, was first uncovered in the 14th century, within the memory of the St. Erkenwald poet and his audience, and served as the inspiration for the tale.

St. Erkenwald may be unreliable as a record of actual archaeological investigation in either the 7th or the 14th century. It certainly seems to reflect a 14th-century interest in the subject, and one writer’s view of the likely reaction to a chance find and the sort of efforts that would be made to explain it.

There has recently been some discussion in the (continued on page 25)

(Fig 3 (left): “But runish were the reasons (sentences) that stood there in a row.” The runic inscription on the left-hand edge of the St. Paul’s slab. (Photo: The Museum of London)

(Fig 3 (right): The runic inscription runs vertically up, then down, the edge of the slab: KINA : LET : LEKIA : STIN : THENSI : AUK : TUKI : (“Ginna had this stone laid, together with Toki”).

16 Any find of this nature on a site which may well have long been regarded as sacred deserves careful consideration in view of such similar finds as those made by Brian Hope-Taylor in the (?) “temple” at the Northumbrian royal centre at Yeavering (B. Hope-Taylor Yeavering; an Anglo-British centre of early Northumbria (London 1977) 98-100; 277-278), earlier discoveries at Harrow Hill, Sussex (G. A. Holleyman “Harrow Hill Excavations 1936” Sussex Archaeol. Coll. 78 (1937) 248-250), or even (perhaps not strictly comparable) those at Cadbury Castle (L.

17 Museum Accession No. 4075, normally displayed in the “Saxon London” gallery.

18 The descriptions of the finding of the stone, though confused, seem to imply this. Its relationship with the skeleton found in a rough hollow to the north is not clear, and there seems to have been no trace at the time of any other stonework making up the supposed cist — though it has been suggested that parts of a grave-slab later acquired by the British Museum might come from the same monument.
wise have been irritating blind spots. As small apertures act as simple lenses, they would also have ensured that these areas were roughly in focus for someone with poor eyesight. The writer, being myopic and normally unable to read at normal distance without the aid of lenses, finds reading quite easy under good illumination whilst looking through these holes, and although the overlapping images do not coincide, the effect of this is minimal, especially when viewing as if through the lenses, with the holes operating in the margins of the area of vision.

Despite the surprising degree of sophistication of this device, there is no reason why the manufacturer of the spectacles should not have grasped the effect of viewing through pinholes at this period. They would seem to be a natural subject for investigation: for example, Leonardo, who was active later in the 15th century, is known to have examined the effect of looking at the stars through pinholes. Small apertures were also used to improve poorly-focussed vision in eskimo spectacles (where doubtless they also helped to reduce glare), but the Trig Lane spectacles provide the earliest European evidence of the use of pin-holes in an optical instrument.

Documentary Evidence for Spectacles in 15th Century London

Spectacles, which were invented in Italy at the end of the 13th century, were apparently quite common by the time of the Trig Lane spectacles. Customs records show that they were being imported into London in large quantities from the late century and evidence for their sale is found in the 15th century satirical poem 'London Lyckpeny' whose destitute subject was pestered to try 'fyne felt hatts, or spectacles for to reede' by Flemish pedlars at the door of Westminster Hall. The mention of Flemish pedlars in particular strengthens the impression that the Trig Lane spectacles were made in the Low Countries. The customs records reveal that most of the ships which were importing spectacles and the merchants who paid the customs levies had Dutch names. As an alternative the spectacles could have been made here by a Dutch immigrant; the earliest known spectacle-maker in England, Paul van (de) Bessen of 'Suthwerk' (active 1458-9), was evidently a recent Dutch immigrant and it is known that there was a well-developed spectacle industry in the Low Countries at this period which seems to have spread from there to Germany, France and Spain. We might well infer that it also spread to this country. Indeed the rules of the Worshipful Company of Spectacle-makers of London, founded in 1629, seem to have been modelled on those of the Netherlandish Spectaclemakers' Companies suggesting that even at this late date the Dutch were still regarded as the leading specialists in this field.

A detailed discussion of these spectacles has been prepared and is expected to appear in one of the national archaeological journals in the next two years.

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(continued from page 7)

editorial columns of Antiquity about the choice of a patron-saint for archaeology. We in London can have no doubts; our patron must be that archaeological bishop St. Erkenwald — if the story is apocryphal it is still as good a basis for the claim as most patron saints can show. Perhaps London's archaeologists should gather each 30th April, the Feast of St. Erkenwald, at the site of his shrine, (not marked in the present cathedral, it lay in the area of the present south aisle of the choir) to pay tribute to all those scholars, antiquarians and archaeologists who have studied the surviving physical evidence for London's history, among all the difficulties caused by constant rebuilding and redevelopment, from the time of Bede and Erkenwald to the present day.

19 Antiquity 54 (1980) 5-6; 84-85.