

Additional Roman stones from Heslington East

A survey and discussion

N. Hodgson
TWM Archaeology

Project no. 1342

25 March 2012

Contextual information corrected 16 May 2012

TWM
Archaeology

Introduction

The present report is an addendum by N. Hodgson (TWM Archaeology) to a report of April 2011 commissioned by York University on 15 fragments of stone, including building material and architectural fragments, found by On Site Archaeology during excavations on behalf of the University in advance of an extension to the university campus at Heslington East.

The stones previously reported were found in 2010-11 incorporated in or surrounding the upper part of a Roman well, dating to after the second/third century AD (information from Graham Bruce of On Site Archaeology). The four stones added here were found during further excavation in 2011 (see catalogue entries for locations).

The site is situated on the south side of Kimberlow Hill at SE 642509, some 4km east of the legionary fortress and *colonia* of York. The well was evidently part of an extensive rural settlement of pre-Roman Iron Age and Roman date. The Roman settlement contained buildings of some status and elaboration: some 65m north of the well was a hypocausted structure (although other than the hypocaust the building was apparently of timber construction); at a similar distance north-west of the well lay a massive 5m square cobbled foundation.

The additional stones were examined in November 2011 and were as follows:

Catalogue

0017. Site number 1891A. Probably a diagonally broken half of a square block of purplish brown coloured millstone grit 250mm deep and originally some 600mm square. The sides are neatly point-dressed but the top is unworked or worn with a central round pre-break hollow 300mm in diameter and 100mm deep. It is therefore probably a pad or socket stone to take some form of upright. From second fill of large pit (1892), probably late fourth-century, immediately north of cobbled 'tower' foundation. Fig. 1.0017.

0018. Site number 1891B. Neatly worked block of purplish brown coloured millstone grit 250mm deep and measuring 670x640mm. The visible plane (the underside could not be examined) is point-dressed to a smooth finish. On one of the shorter sides a hollow 50mm deep penetrates from the invisible underside (where it has a width of about 175mm) to about half the depth of the block. Findspot as above. Fig. 1.0018.

0019. Site number 1611. Fragment of a finely worked millstone grit block. Part of each vertical face is intact but either the upper or lower plane is heavily worn (possibly by water) and the opposite plane broken away. The maximum surviving depth is 300mm. In its intact dimension (the sides) the block measures 400x380mm. Where undamaged the sides are lightly and neatly point-dressed to a smooth finish. There are neatly drafted vertical margins 20mm wide on two diametrically opposed corners of the block. These do not seem to have existed on the other two corners. Such chisel-drafted margins would be matched on the joining blocks and normally served to produce a shallow framing band which highlighted the joints between the stones in the finished building. The occurrence on more than one face and on opposed corners is puzzling here and no obvious function for this well-worked block can be suggested. Unstratified in a sandy deposit to the east of the main excavations. Photos at Fig. 3.1 and 3.2.

0020. Site number 1888. Roof finial in coarse-grained yellow sandstone. The finial has a base roughly 250mm square and 150mm deep which rises into a cylinder 150-190mm in diameter and 100mm tall, surmounted by a hat-like truncated pyramid with sides the same length as the finial base. The overall surviving height is 400mm: it is not certain whether the stone is complete or the very top has broken off. The upper plane dips markedly and might be where a crowning knob or ball has broken away (see conjectural reconstruction at top right of Fig. 2). There are shallow arch like openings (35mm high and 111mm wide) in two opposite sides of the finial base which indicate the ends of a channel running from one side to the other to seat the finial on a roof ridge; the base and cylinder are in fact slightly elongated along this alignment. Slightly off-centre in this depression is a sub-square flat-bottomed hollow, 60x60mm and 10mm deep.

The channelled base suggests strongly that the finial was placed on the ridge of a roof. A very similar accommodation can be seen in the base of a finial from Llantwit Major (Nash-Williams 1953, 132 and Plate XI.3). The additional underside hollow allowed the finial to be anchored (perhaps temporarily) to some feature while the roof was finished.

The final came from the late-fourth century filling of the stone well (1852). Fig. 2.0020 and photos at Fig. 4.3-4.

Discussion

Very little can be said about the three stone blocks except that they do not match either of the main categories of architectural stonework already identified on the site (voussoirs and sandstone architectural blocks), indicating that there may have been a wide range of applications of high status stonework at the Heslington site. 0019 indicates an ambitious structure with a high level of craftsmanship.

The finial is very probably associated with the large quantities of lozenge shaped stone roof slates found in the same excavations at Heslington and suggests a combination of stone finials and roof slates that is most commonly attested in south-west Britain. Decorative roof finials of carved stone have been discussed by Thompson (in Lowther 1976, 40-1) and Blagg (1977, 52-4). Blagg identified two regional groupings of stone finials. A well-known tower type, often taking the form of a four-way arch surmounted by a roof or pediment, concentrates in the south-west part of Roman Britain and is essentially a third and fourth century phenomenon. In the military north, and particularly at military sites, pinecone finials are more common. Blagg identified a third, rarer type, taking the form of a phallus.

At first sight the Heslington finial does not fit any of these categories and no close parallel has been found. However, although it lacks the classic four-way arch openings, there are features that this piece shares with the south-western examples. We have already noted its style of seating, but there is also a clear similarity between the pyramidal upper part at Heslington and the pitched upper part of the tower type. The Llantwit Major example is again very close; this finishes with an uppermost knobbed projection which could well indicate what has broken away from the Heslington stone. A finial recently found at the villa at Turkdean, Glos. (Holbrook 2004, 62) has a cylinder rising above its arched openings of similar proportions to the cylindrical part at Heslington. It should also be stressed that the Heslington finial is no smaller in overall proportions than the southern types. Although it is of simple and rather crudely

executed design the Heslington stone seems to be in the general tradition of roof decoration of high-status buildings (most often villas or temples) more familiar from south-west Britain, and (on present knowledge) alien to the military north. The lozenge shaped stone roofing slates at Heslington fit comfortably into the same tradition. The occurrence of the finial at its northern findspot is of interest, and the lack of local parallels striking.

At present there seems to be no clear indication of which building the finial comes from. The association with a roof ridge makes it unlikely that the finial should be associated with whatever tower-like monument stood on the square foundation found in the vicinity. A high-status building of the third or fourth centuries must be sought; the findspot of the roofing slates may offer a clue.

Recommendation

The finial should be retained and illustrated and described in the published report.

Bibliography

Blagg, T.F.C. 1977 'Schools of Stonemasons in Britain', in J. Munby and M. Henig (eds.), *Roman Life and Art in Britain*, BAR Brit. Ser. 41.1, Oxford, 51–74

Holbrook, N. 2004 'Turkdean Roman villa, Gloucestershire: archaeological investigations 1997-1998', *Britannia* 35, 39-76

Lowther, A.W.G. 1976 'Romano-British Chimney Pots and Finials', *Antiquaries J.* 56, 35-48

Nash-Williams, V.E. 1953 'The Roman villa at Llantwit Major, Glamorgan', *Archaeologia Cambrensis* 102, Pt. 2, 89-163

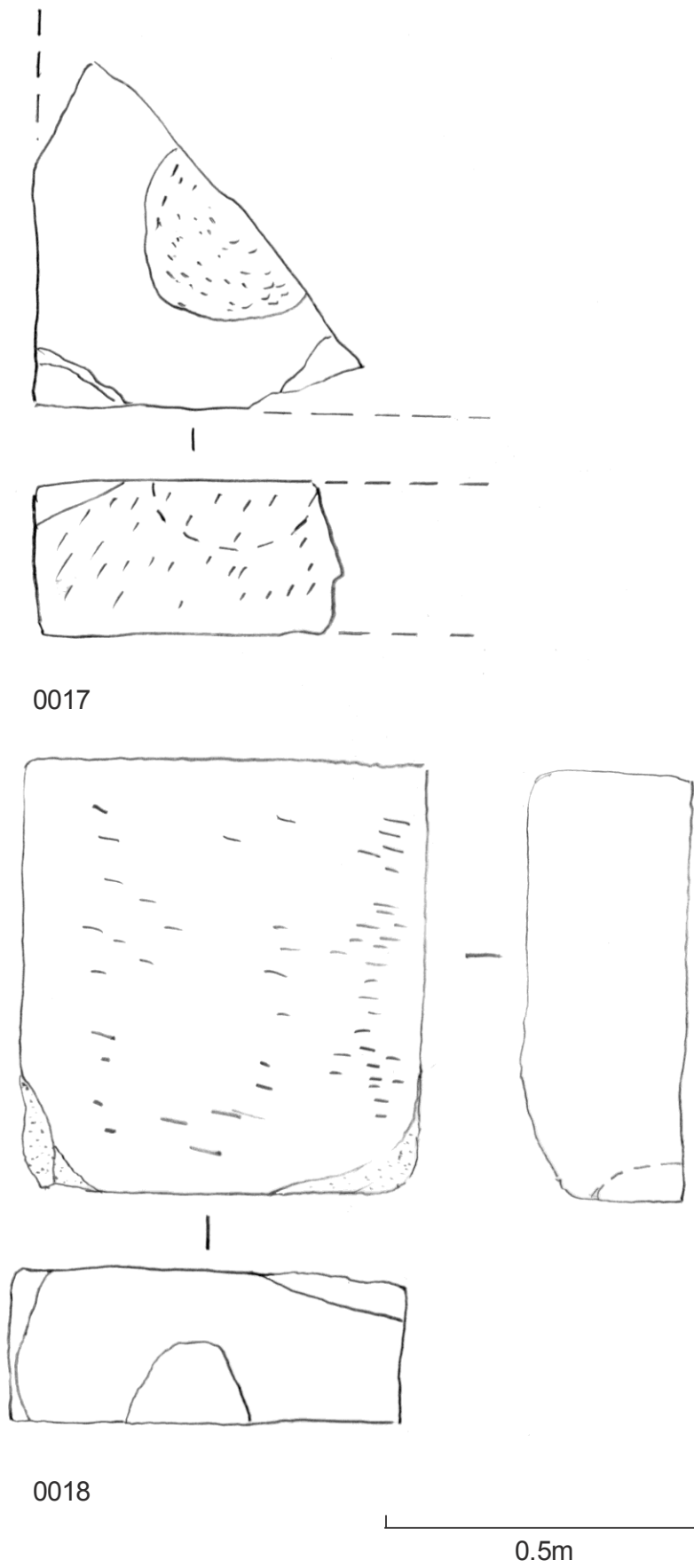


Figure 1

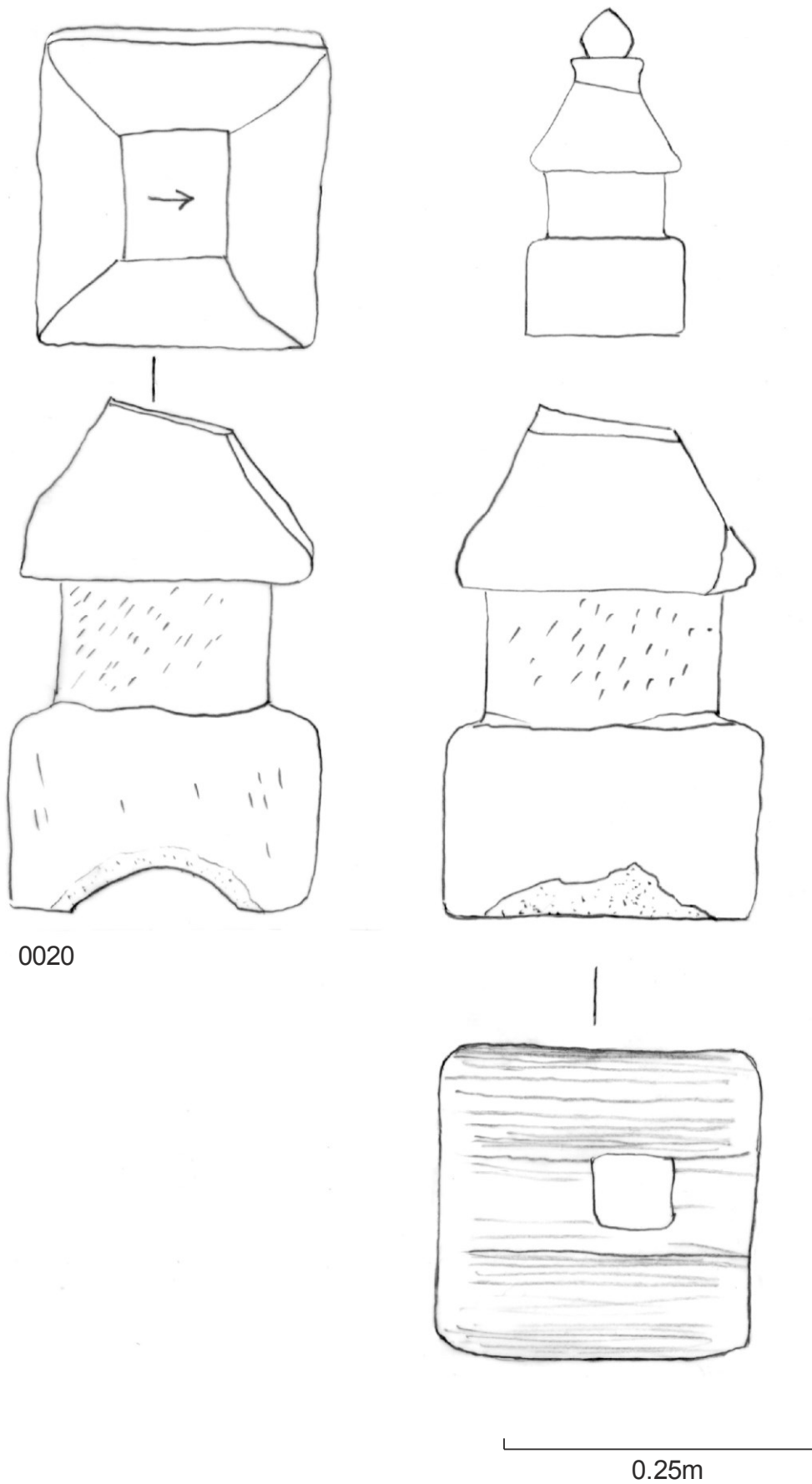


Figure 2



1. 0019



2. 0019

Figure 3



3. 0020



4. 0020



5. 0020

Figure 4