
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society

(incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

Volume XCVIII
for 2009



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Published by the Cambridge Antiquarian Society 2009

ISSN 0309-3606

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A curious object from Firs Farm, Caxton

Aileen Connor

Excavation at Firs Farm, Caxton (TL 3021 5788) found evidence for a possible Roman to late medieval track coupled with extensive water management and limited settlement activity that was at its height in the medieval period. Of particular interest was the discovery of a 'face' made from animal bone and lava quern, found associated with a late medieval timber building. The significance of this composite object is debatable but could include protection against witchcraft.

Caxton is recorded in the Domesday Book as *Caustone*, a name derived from 'Kakkr's' farm (Reaney 1943, 157). Other than Ermine Street and a reference to a mosaic pavement and cobbled floor (HER 02416) there is little evidence for Roman activity in the village. The evidence for Anglo-Saxon activity is similarly sparse. The settlement may have a late Scandinavian origin and the site of Caxton moats (HER CB 15405) revealed traces of Saxon or Norman occupation (Dunning 1973, 26). The present settlement focus is thought to have its origins in the thirteenth century when Ermine Street (The Great North Road) was growing in importance as a major route from London to the north. A market charter was granted to Baldwin de Freville in 1247 for a site next to the road: the market continued in use until the eighteenth century (Wilson 1870–2). The parish church of St Andrew's has its origins in the eleventh century although most of the surviving building dates to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The church is some distance from the modern village, and lies within an area of earthworks, narrow lanes and abandoned closes thought to be the focus of Caxton in Anglo-Saxon and early medieval times (RCHME 1968, 34). Excavation by OA East (formerly CAM ARC) took place in this area at the junction of St Peter's Street and Gransden Road, during October and November 1999.

The excavation revealed a ditched track, possibly Roman in origin and still in use in the fifteenth century. This track apparently continued the line of St Peter's Street to the north, called Potter's Way on a map of 1750 (CUL Maps Rb10 *Map of Manor of Caxton*), a name sometimes associated with Roman roads and known to have been used in connection with Ermine

Street (Reaney 1943, 29). The area was evidently troubled by flooding as there was extensive evidence for drainage which was presumably successful since timber structures were subsequently built in the later medieval period.

An unusual finds group was recovered from the foundation trench of one of these buildings (SF 12; Fig. 1). This composite item comprised an unmodified cattle axis vertebra with a fragment of trimmed Niedemendig lava quern wedged into the vertebral foramen and packed with unfired clay. It is debatable whether it was deliberately made, since the stone may have become accidentally wedged into the bone as a result of post-depositional processes, and the clay around it accumulated naturally over time. Arguing against this is the fact that the resulting object is clear-

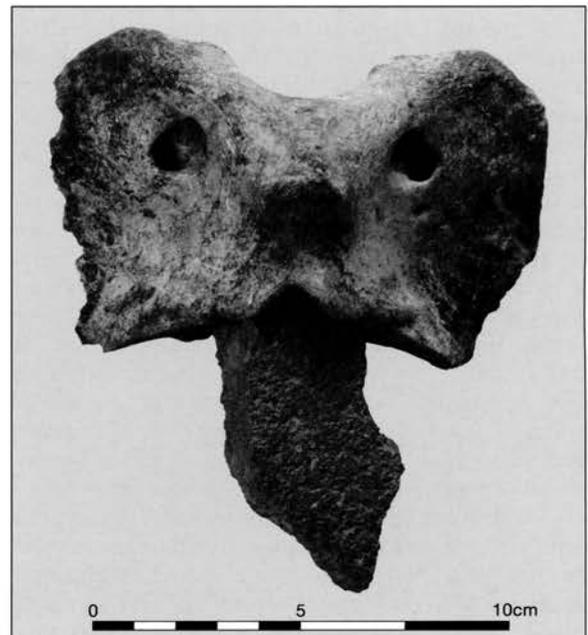


Figure 1. SF 12 showing fragment of quern stone and cattle bone as excavated.

ly reminiscent of a face (vertebra) with a protruding tongue (broken quernstone). The 'face' is cat-like in appearance perhaps implying an association with witches and witchcraft; alternatively, it may represent a human or other animal. The human perceptual system is designed to identify and recognize faces, and it is therefore no surprise that this object appears as a face to us today, but is equally likely to have been imagined as such by someone in the thirteenth or fourteenth century (Chris Wingfield pers. comm.).

If it is accepted that the object was deliberately, if crudely, manufactured then what was its purpose? The author has been unable to find any direct parallels, although a number of possibilities come to mind; children's toy or puppet, joke, ritual (such as might be used in witchcraft or as protection against witches or evil), a grotesque representation of a green man or a crude sexual image. Animal bones are known to have been used for a number of folklore-related purposes including divination, to bring luck or good fortune (e.g. wish-bones) and to aid healing (Oliver Douglas pers. comm.). There are many examples of folklore concerning the protection of houses from witchcraft, evil spirits and other dangers, by the careful placement of certain items at places of entry such as thresholds, chimneys and windows (Simpson & Stroud 2000, 'houses'). Objects specifically related to protection from witchcraft include jars but these are usually more obvious and often found in later contexts. Ralph Merrifield's (1987) comprehensive work on this subject contains no direct parallels despite the wide range of objects cited such as shoes, witches' bottles, dried cats and horses skulls. Brian Hoggard (1999) has collected many examples of concealed objects, but again there are no direct parallels for the Caxton piece. There are several recorded instances in Cambridgeshire of houses built in the sixteenth or seventeenth century containing objects in their walls, foundations or chimneys (Porter 1969, 180–82). Items include shoes, bottles containing salt or sometimes iron objects, iron being thought to be particularly effective against witches. There are also examples of unusually-shaped stones, dolls, and animal remains such as 'mummified' cats, horse bones, skulls and even blood (Porter 1969, 181). The inventory of concealed finds compiled by Jeremy Harte for Dorset (2009) includes a wide variety of objects including instances of placing ox or cow hearts in the cavities of walls or chimneys. Given the variety of object types and materials that have been found, it is certainly possible to place the Caxton 'face' in this category.

Another possibility is that the face was meant to be seen, perhaps as a crude copy of the stone heads used to decorate or protect houses and churches (Simpson & Stroud 2000, 'houses'). Simpson and Stroud (2000, 'heads') argue that the significance of such head symbols is 'ambiguous': whilst they may have their origins in pagan ritual, they are such powerful symbols that they need not be specifically associated with a particular religion or culture, and whilst they may be 'aggressive guardians' they could equally be purely decorative.

This curious 'face', possibly a protection against witchcraft, could be considered as a coincidence but may yet prove to have parallels elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Cambridgeshire County Council for providing planning advice, Martin Grant Homes (UK) Ltd funded the excavation. The excavators were Aileen Connor, Spencer Cooper, Tony Baker, Chris Montague, Diane Wells, Andrew Hatton and Phil Church. The photograph was taken by Andrew Corrigan. Elizabeth Popescu prepared the article for publication.

Cambridge Antiquarian Society is grateful to Oxford Archaeology East for a grant towards the publication of this paper.

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