

Medieval graffiti from Bermondsey Abbey

Märil Gaimster researches armorial scratchings from the latest excavations

In advance of the redevelopment of Bermondsey Square in Southwark, archaeological excavations have been carried out by Pre-Construct Archaeology, revealing the foundations of the medieval Bermondsey Abbey. Among the discoveries in 2006 was a faced stone block carved with the representations of a helm, shield and sword. The original position of the stone within the abbey is not known. It was found reused in a post-medieval wall in the south side of the nave; this formed part of the northern wing of the 16th-century mansion of Sir Thomas Pope, a building that survived as tenements into the late 18th or early 19th centuries.¹

The graffiti measures 110mm from the bottom of the shield to the top of the helm. Even if it is quite crudely executed, the carving gives enough detail of the individual elements to offer a good idea of its date. A late medieval date is indicated by the size of the shield, but also by the conical-topped helm with its eye-slit and indications of plumage or a crest. This is likely to be a representation of a “great” helm, a type that was in fashion from the beginning of the 14th and into the early 15th centuries. A more precise date in the later 14th century may be suggested from the shape of the sword pommel; this appears to be of the so-called “scent-stopper” form, which came into general use around 1360.² The sword, which is placed behind the shield, is



possibly a single-edged falchion.³

Armorial graffiti is not unusual in medieval churches, where representations ranging from armed knights to sets of shields and helms form one of the main recurring themes of carvings. These include several elaborate crested helms of a similar date as the Bermondsey graffiti.⁴ Shields are usually charged with personal devices, sometimes enabling the identification of a specific coat of arms.⁵ The simple saltire on the Bermondsey shield is far too general a device to suggest a coat of arms, and it may be that it was intended simply as a symbolic representation. The position of the shield under the

helm, rather than in front of it, could suggest it was read as shorthand for an armoured knight rather than a heraldic display.

Excavation of the Bermondsey site is still ongoing; the full publication of this interesting find, placing it in a physical and social context, will appear in due time.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 C. Blair, *European Armour* (1958) 197.
- 2 R. E. Oakeshott, *The Sword in the Age of Chivalry* (1964) 105, Type T1
- 3 pers. comm. Claude Blair
- 4 V. Pritchard, *English medieval graffiti* (1967) Figs 101, 124-25 and 149.
- 5 *Ibid.* 95, Fig. 125

Finds of the quarter?

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and other laity. Evidence for medical care and treatment includes a hernia belt and medicinal plants, while the excavations also provide information on food and diet, material culture and daily life.

Identification of the priory's inhabitants includes discussion of the burials within different parts of the precinct. A total of 721 inhumations were excavated in the external

cemetery, the church, cloister and chapter house, and 664 of these have been analysed. These burials form a study group of national significance and the book looks at burial customs, demographic profile, health and disease.

The impact of the Dissolution and the history of the site up to the 19th century includes evidence for the leasing of surviving buildings,

garrisoning of troops during the Civil War and the development of 'Merton Abbey' as a manufacturing centre after the 1660s and particularly for textiles.

The Augustinian priory of St Mary Merton, Surrey: excavations 1976–90 by Pat Miller and David Saxby (MoLAS Monograph 34), £27.95. Available from MoLAS (tel 0207 410 2201 or email bookshop@molas.org.uk) or the Museum of London bookshop (tel 0207 7600 3699 or email shop@museumoflondon.org.uk).