

3.2 Argument for the re-interpretation

by Martin Carver

Description of the Investigations

Excavations by Adrian Oswald (then of Birmingham City Museum) were undertaken in 1954 at the west end of St Mary's Church (FIG 3/1). Here he found a set of stone foundations interpreted as belonging to the medieval chapel of St Bertelin, and beneath them a set of post-holes with a central grave-shaped pit containing a large lump of oak (FIG 3/6). This was initially interpreted (by C A Ralegh Radford) as a wooden cross of the Mercian period and reconstructed at the site. Samples thought to be from this object were submitted for radiocarbon dating in 1971, by which time it had become a "cruciform coffin" (Shotton and Williams 1971, 152).

Method

The stratification of the earliest phases of Adrian Oswald's excavation was re-examined in 1984 in the light of the radiocarbon dates (FR 3.3) and our own experiences digging in Stafford. A location plan, stratification diagram, and phase plans were prepared. The information mostly derives from Oswald, 1955, to which were added the three radiocarbon dates published in 1971 (Shotton and Williams 1971, 152-3). C Cane also made a visit to the British Museum (where the finds had been taken) and M Carver had a meeting with Adrian Oswald. All observations were collected in respect of features and contexts, and these were redefined and renumbered for greater clarity (see FR 3.4) and then used to make a stratification diagram (FIG 3/7). This diagram was used to propose a basic division into four periods, and period plans drawn up (FIG 3/8-11).

Analysis

The site had been largely destroyed by 19th century graves, with only patches of wall and floor and several early graves definable. The surface of the natural sand lay 5' below modern ground surface and 'falls away' to the south. This slope was also reflected in trial excavations ST 25,

25 c (1979). No Roman pottery was reported. Although Mr. Horne spoke of a large ditch with Roman material (in 1975), this was not confirmed by Adrian Oswald (lunch meeting at the *Atheneum*, 1981).

The phasing depended mainly on the visibility of features in or under a dark brown layer (1000). Only F8, 9 and 10 were claimed as sealed by it, the remainder of the post-holes being cut through it. The "cross" pit (F 13) was either cut through it, or contained the equivalent material redeposited as fill (1006). Oswald was uncertain whether the pit F13 was earlier or later than the layer I have called 1000, but either of the eventualities mentioned above mean that it is later. The section (FIG 3/6) is equivocal in that layers supposedly within the pit are not distinguished from those cut by it or over it. The sequence can best be reconciled with verbal descriptions by supposing by all the layers 1006, 1008, 1005 and 1004 were deposited in that order within, or sagging into, a pit (F13) containing the wood lump 1007. The shape of the wood lump, with a cylindrical base, the leather attached to the top (ie inside), the nail, all suggest that this was a coffin, not a cross. It most resembles the tree-trunk coffins known from the 7th century onwards in East Anglia (Carver 2005, 292-8). Poor bone preservation is unfortunately common with these heavy timber coffins.

The dates from this sequence are not consistent, since the earliest are at the top and the latest at the bottom:

Birm 137 First Sample: "oak believed part of cruciform coffin of St. Bertelin"

770 +/- 78 BP ie. 1180 AD

Birm 136a,b Second Sample: "charcoal associated with wooden remains, believed ..."

2 parts: a. 1105 +/- 90 BP = 845 AD

b. 1120 +/- 120 BP = 830 AD

"First Sample" would appear to be from 1007 in F 13.

"Second Sample" would appear to be from 1005.

Between 1007 and 1005 comes 1008 which contained a farthing of Athelred II (971-1016), said

by Dolley deposited c1000AD (Oswald 1955).

On the face of it, the layers are inverted. An oak coffin dated to 1180 was placed in a pit around that date and subsequently covered by a layer with an 11th coin and then a layer with 9th century charcoal.

The samples, which were submitted by P H Robinson, originated from the time before radiocarbon dating had been invented and the definition of layers on site was not very precise. Even so the Birmingham Laboratory which dated the samples would have been ready to distinguish wood from charcoal. Birm 137 which gave the 1180 date is described as “oak believed to part of cruciform coffin of St Bertelin” ; while Birm 136 a and b are “charcoal associated with wood remains believed cruciform coffin of St Bertelin”. Shotton and Williams comment: “Close correspondence of Birm 136a and 136b suggests validity of date. It could have been a wooden object from a Saxon church, for such material was burnt when no longer required. Unless contaminated, Birm 137 which is probably wood of a coffin, must be later and not connected with St Bertelin” (Shotton and Williams 1971, 153).

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the wood piece is from a coffin and dates to the late 12th century, but it is not impossible that it is from another coffin (F27, 28 and 30 all had wooden coffins). Since two samples arrived in Birmingham presumably from the BM, they may have come from two different contexts. This would leave us free to suppose that the date of 1007 is 9th century or later. Given that the coffin is oak and a tree-trunk, a range of dates is possible from the same trunk. However it would still be expected that preserved wood would be heartwood and thus date considerably earlier than its deposition. The same can be said of “charcoal”. There are possibly too many uncertainties and unknowns here to be sure of the exact context of the 9th century or the 12th century dates.

The 1971 dates were not calibrated. Judging from other dates collected for Stafford (FR 8.72) a date of 1120 BP would calibrate to around 880-980 (1sig) or 800-1000 (2sig) cal AD (cf Tipping Street, Har 8240). Thus the dates from the samples of “charcoal associated with wood” fit comfortably within the expected Late Saxon occupation for Stafford.

The tiles from floor 20/1001 were examined by Charlotte Cain who found most of them to be of Class B and C, dating from 1350-1420.

Interpretation

The general sequence reported by Oswald was endorsed, that is a timber structure was succeeded by a stone chapel. But the earliest part of the sequence, associated with the timber structure and the coffin pit was found to be inverted with respect to the dates, that is the layer of charcoal (1005; 9th c C14) lay above the layer containing the farthing of Athelred (1008; dep 1000AD) which lay above the wood of the log coffin (“cross” 1007; C14 c1180). On the face of it, the coffin (F13/1007) was buried within in a late 12th century stone chapel, backfilled with Late Saxon debris and a floor (21/1003) laid over the top. This would imply that the coffin, which is central to the nave of the chapel, could simply be part of a late 12th century foundation process.

However, there was sufficient reason to suppose that there was a Late Saxon presence of some kind at this site. The dress hook, the book clasp and the farthing should all be pre-Conquest. The Late Saxon “charcoal layer” (1005), the purplish layer (1008, stained by the silver coin) and the pebbly layer (1009) do not sound as if they had been redeposited. The dark brown layers 1000a/b resemble in their description, and their situation above the natural sand, layers 2238 and 2239 at St Mary’s Grove, namely an Iron Age and Roman cultivated soil. As there, some post holes at St Bertelin’s no doubt belonged to a prehistoric or Roman phase (our notional period 1), but the majority were reported as cutting 1000 and make a respectable rectangular timber structure about 30x12ft (9.14x2.65m, a ratio of 5:2) with a beam slot at the E end (F17-19) (FIG 3/9). The coffin pit F13 is central to this structure and more nearly aligned with it than with the stone building.

In option 2, we are allowed to suppose that the log coffin was buried within a timber structure and that this is what was dated to the period AD 800-1000. A date in the 9th century is statistically possible, but not in the 8th century, however attractive that might be for other reasons. Of the burials, grave 23 was cut by F16, a post-hole containing the dress hook, and grave 27 was a head-support burial, although within a coffin. These two, with grave 28, align

well with the timber structure, so these three at least could be Late Saxon in date.

This timber chapel or mortuary house may have burnt down, accounting for the charcoal layer (1005). It was superseded by a stone chapel which had a truer E-W alignment, a nave and a narrower chancel and a floor (F21/1003) (FIG 3/10). This floor sealed the log coffin (1007) and the layers above it (1004, 1005, 1008, 1006, 1009). Graves 22, 30-34 align with these walls. In option 2, we have to suppose that the 1180 date no longer applies, since we can no longer be sure to what it refers. Given the plan of Chapel 2, a post-conquest date seems likely.

A brown soil (1002), interpreted as a layer of “disuse” appears to separate the floor of stone Chapel 2 (1003), from the floor of a new stone Chapel 3 (20/1001) (FIG 3/11). This rebuilt chapel is offset to the south, so a refoundation from scratch seems likely. The new floor was associated with floor tiles which were dated to the later 14th century.

Conclusion

The best fit for a very uneven set of evidence would seem to be that a timber chapel (Chapel 1) was erected on old cultivated soil in the period 800-1000. It can be noted that this date-range, like all others from Stafford, allows this to belong to Athelflaeda’s burh founded in 913. A tree-trunk burial was placed centrally in this structure, and presumably was an object of commemoration or veneration, perhaps of the eponymous St Bertelin. The finds include a coin, a dress hook and a book clasp, particularly diagnostic of neither a monastic nor a secular establishment. One burial of the period had stone head-supports in a coffin.

This chapel was probably destroyed at the Conquest, but rebuilt on an improved alignment in the same place, so probably in living memory, in stone (Chapel 2). This chapel fell into disuse, and was probably demolished before being resurrected, after a period of disuse, slightly to the south as Chapel 3. The patterned tile floor of this chapel shows that it had been laid in the late 14th century or later.