

A stone mortar from Wawne, East Yorkshire (OSA02 EX02)

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An almost complete stone mortar was recovered from excavations at Wawne, East Yorkshire. The mortar came from context 1195, part of context group 1191 which is the lowest pottery-bearing deposit in a sequence found during a cutting across the elliptical feature. The entire sequence appears to date to the 13th century and thus this object should be of early 13th century or earlier date. The site itself appears to have been first occupied around the middle of the 12th century, thus giving an overall date range for the mortar of c.1140 to c.1250.

The mortar was carved from a block of oolitic limestone containing few, if any shell fragments. This was examined at x20 magnification by Prof Peacock who identifies it as an Inferior Oolite, probably of Lincolnshire origin. Although Lincolnshire Limestone outcrops throughout the length of the Lincoln Edge it is most likely that the mortar was produced as a sideline by masons working in an established quarry. The main quarries for this rock were at Lincoln and Ancaster, both places where access to the rock is made easier by valleys cutting through the edge. Of the two sources, the quarries at Lincoln were probably in full operation during the later 12th and early 13th centuries as a result of the campaigns of Bishops Hugh and Grosseteste under whose auspices the entire minster church was rebuilt, leaving only the west end of the Romanesque church intact.

The mortar consists of a slightly rounded, almost cylindrical, bowl 185mm diameter and 147mm high with two opposed semi-circular mouldings 53mm diameter which form the handle and spout. The bowl of the mortar is 90-95mm diameter at present still filled with the soil matrix from which it was excavated and the mortar is unwashed. It is therefore possible to use organic chemical analysis to determine whether any of the original contents of the mortar remain intact. Any such study would have to examine a sample drilled from the interior surface of the mortar and a sample of the soil matrix and would isolate and compare any organic compounds found in those samples.

The form of the mortar is unusual. In most cases the ribs which form the spout and handle are of rectilinear cross-section and often do not extend the entire height of the vessel. Furthermore, the mortar is taller than most medieval mortars and lacks their rounded, almost hemispherical profile and footing around the base. One might therefore postulate that the mortar is formed by the reuse of a moulded stone shaft, except for the slight swelling of the body which in a shaft would be complete cylindrical.

Assessment

The mortar is an interesting object in its own right and gains even more interest through its relatively tightly dated archaeological context. The possibility of undertaking chemical analysis of the original contents of a medieval stone mortar is also extremely unusual since mortars were often reused as hardcore once broken or discarded and in most cases have been cleaned using unknown methods after discovery. Any such cleaning would contaminate the potential contents and should only take place after

sampling. The mortar should be illustrated and photographed and has the potential for display. A fully-referenced note on the mortar, together with a mention of comparanda from Beverley, Hull and other local sites, should be prepared.