

Worked stone assessment

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Undated

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Number 1 Poultry

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1 Introduction

The worked stone recovered from Poultry includes a number of fragments of sepulchral monuments, of which three types are represented and will require fairly detailed publication. The architectural worked stone is in contrast scanty, poorly preserved and almost entirely astylar, and there is therefore no prospect for architectural reconstruction. The publication of this material would only be justified where stones can be linked to a particular structure, and where this criterion is met illustration estimates are given. Date spans are given for these elements to provide a *terminus post quem* for their re-use contexts and these are unlikely to undergo any revision.

The tomb slab fragments from Poultry derive from sealed reuse contexts associated with remodelling of the church of St Benet Sherehog. Three grave slab fragments were reused in foundation [1503], associated with a medieval buttress of the church. Other tomb slab fragments which were recovered from the site clearance context [700] can be confidently associated with the church.

The poor and fragmentary nature of the assemblage meant that there was an unusually large number of stone fragments which required specialist examination for their fundamental status to be established. The potential of items such as wall veneers was therefore lessened, and the worked stone specialist concentrated on those veneers that appeared to be 'mouldings'. Although 6 fragments indicated as 'mouldings' on the finds list have not been seen by the specialist, examination of the accession cards indicates that nothing of significance has been omitted.

2 The assemblage

2.1 Stone types present

Four different petrologies can be recognised for the sepulchral monuments but have not as yet been provenanced in any detail. The use of different types of stone seems closely related to function, with the differentiation by function closely resembling that from other sites in the Greater London Area (ie Merton Abbey, St Mary Spital).

a) Glauconitic sandstone

Greensand occurs as far west as Wiltshire (Sherlock 1960, 8), but the occurrences here probably derived from the many quarries in the Surrey North Downs near Reigate and Mertsam (Salzman 1951, 129). All the recognisable medieval architectural fragments from the site are cut from variants of this stone. The name *Reigate stone* is generic and not an indicator of exact provenance.

b) Prominent shelly oolitic limestone

Similar coarse-textured fossiliferous *ragstones* were widely used for stone coffins. It resembles Barnack rag from Lincolnshire or Cotswold stone. A known petrological source for this stone would be of general interest to the subject. Logic would suggest that these coffins were made elsewhere and imported to London in a finished state.

c) English 'Marbles'

Two fragments of Purbeck Marble(?) <4223> <4238> from a Roman context can be provisionally identified. Both are wall veneer fragments cut in imitation of fielded timber panelling. Another fragment <3623> is a Roman wall veneer of unknown petrology.

At least two varieties of polished limestones were used for the flat and raised medieval funerary slabs and the headstone <3383>. The dense grey/blue rock used for the flat tombslab and paviers(?) closely resembles that used in similar applications in the Greater London Area and is probably a facies of the Purbeck Beds series. One of the slab fragments <3367> is rich in fossils (watersnail?) which should aid its accurate petrological identification. The raised sepulchral monuments <562> and <3355> seem to be dressed from a different variety of limestone which is more pink and pallid than the stone used for the flat tombslabs. This has degraded badly over time. The relative softness indicates a different source to the flat tombslab fragments, and it could be from Bethersden (Kent), Frosterley (Durham), or Petworth (Sussex) (Cook 1954, 241). These quarries were all exploited when the fashion for dark 'marble' was at its height. A worn pavier? <5970> from a Roman context [18085] resembles a dark grey shale/slate but no bedding is apparent and this petrology would merit examination.

d) Oolitic limestone

The two fragments retained from the eastern jamb of the church's south door are greatly obscured by algae, but preliminary examination seems to indicate a *fish roe* texture characteristic of such East Anglian limestones as Ketton stone. One of the very rare scientific examinations of building stone from Roman London identified the use of building stone that closely equates to Barnack stone and Weldon stone (Hill *et al* 1980, 198-200), and the positive identification of the fragments as deriving from these sources might indicate the use of re-used Roman building stone.

e) Millstone Grit

One of the vernacular postpads <520> reused in the church [1947] appears to be cut from this hard stone or a similar stone not normally encountered in a medieval London context.

2.2 Items of particular interest

a) The inscribed grave slab [1503] <561> (three fragments):

The three fragments of Purbeck Marble fit together and all are thought to derive from the same reuse context. The slab followed the tapering shape of the coffin that it originally covered. The two unaccessioned fragments derive from the 'foot' end. The slab was completely plain apart from an inscription that ran around the edge. This was cut in Lombardic script which allows the slab to be broadly dated to before 1350 (Boyle 1969, 96). The use of Purbeck marble for this purpose refines the date to not earlier than c.1190, when this marble came into fashion (Salzman 1951, 134). Although Purbeck marble ceased to be favoured for buildings by c.1400, it continued to be used in tombs until the mid-sixteenth century (ibid, 135).

The cut letters formed the settings of bronze (*latten*?) letters, as were used in the Cosmati Pavement in Westminster Abbey (Foster 1991). These were presumably robbed at the time of the slab's destruction but two of the intervening colons survive *in-situ*. There are traces of a resinous infill in the settings on <561> which glued the letters and it may be practical to analyse this composition as well as the metallurgic composition of the punctuation marks.

Inscriptions consisting of large individually-cast lombardic letter set in stone were originally restricted to texts and enough survives of the St Benet Sherehog tomb slab to show that it was entirely plain apart from the inscription around the edge. Two examples of such simple inscription brasses dating to the late 1270s remain at Westminster Abbey (Binski 1987, 171). These brasses were cheap, and as such, were available to a wide segment of the population.

The inscription at the foot may read

'...DEU:DE:SAHALME:EIT:ME...' Old French *Deu de sa halme eit me[rci]* 'god give his soul mercy' (John Clark pers.comm.)

Four legible letters survive on a deteriorated fragment of the side <561> '....CHAR...' which word evidently lacks both its beginning and end. Conservation of the surface and removal of reuse mortar may permit a reading of the text that intervenes between 'merci' and '..char..' Such an epithet is certainly earlier than c.1380-1400 when Old French ceases to be used, at least in documents (Tony Dyson, pers.comm.). In its entirety the inscription probably gave little other information than the name and occupation of the individual and the granting of days of pardon from purgatory in return for prayers said for the deceased (Binski 1987, 172). Further inspection by a specialist should take place following cleaning and conservation.

There are five other uninscribed fragments that also probably derive from sepulchral monuments but only one of these <3665> derived from a secure context [871]. All are completely plain and show signs of wear and it is therefore possible that they are paving slabs that derive from a very expensive general reflooring of the church in the thirteenth century.

b) The headstone

The headstone <3383> can be dated to c.1190-1350 on the grounds of its petrology and calligraphy. The irregular slab of Purbeck? Marble that was used was probably a cheap offcut and the demotic inscription is adapted to make the maximum use of the small space available. This implies that the burial was of a person of middling status. The use of a headstone confirms the existence of an external graveyard during the period c.1190-1350.

c) The raised coffin lid <562>

This Purbeck Marble fragment is the 'foot' end of a tapering cover for a stone coffin; the taper allegedly dating it to before 1275 (Boyle 1969, 93). The upper edge of the coffin would have been flush with the floor surface with the lid standing proud. The edges of the lid were therefore ornamented with double hollow chamfers separated by 'spike' mouldings. This form of lid is very common and has been found on various monastic sites in the London area (Merton Abbey, St Mary Spital, St Mary Clerkenwell). The 'stepped' ornament of the cross foot is paralleled by an excavated example at St.Gregory's Priory, Canterbury and has also been observed at Lesnes abbey (Clapham 1915), and was a fairly standard motif.

d) The limestone coffin fragments [2075] <563>

Two joining fragments formed parts of the base of one roughly dressed rectilinear stone coffin. They permit reconstruction of the coffin's width but not length. The coffin closely resembled examples from Merton Abbey and is primarily of geological interest (see above).

e) A child's coffin slab <3356> <3357>

The scale of these adjoining fragments indicate that they formed part of the Purbeck marble(?) lid of a child's coffin.

f) Datable Architectural fragments (all Glauconitic sandstone except where stated otherwise)

Note that *vernacular* is used to distinguish the postpads that do not seem to respect any normal stylistic canons, and it is possible that these elements are strays from surrounding timber houses. In the list below, the underlined stones are recommended for illustration, usually if they may derive from the first phase of St Benet Sherehog. The spread of dates indicates that more than one 'first phase' is indicated by the worked stone. The italicised entries have been dated by art-historical methods which are more reliable than the tooling dates (unitalicised), but in no case can a time bracket of less than fifty years be suggested. Architectural reconstruction of the base of a round pier <519><564> can be carried out. The other underlined stones are individually worth illustrating.

[70] <346> *Roll and fillet* 1220-1350
 [1514]<399>Chamfered door jamb 1225-1325
 [1947]<517>Vernacular postpad base 1050-1200?
 [1540]<518> *Quirk and hollow* table mould 1050-1180
 [1554] <519> *Round pier base* 1200-1250
 [1947] <520> Vernacular postpad base 1050-1150?
 [70]<564> Round pier: 1150-1250
 [1544]<413> Hollow chamfered plinth 1200-1350
 [1001]<414> uninterpretable fragment 1100-1250 (tooling)
 [702] <296> *scroll moulding*: 1250-1350
 [7055] <1134> Unrecognisable fragment: tooling 1250-1350
 [16007] <3361> window sill: tooling 1150-1350
 [16007] <3360> Chamfered quoin: tooling 1150-1275
 [16007] <3365> Chamfered voussoir (Kentish ragstone?) tooling 1180-1540
 [16007] <3362> Small door? window? voussoir: tooling 1150-1250

g) The in-situ fragments of quoin from the eastern jamb of the church's south door

Preliminary examination indicates that both fragments derive from a larger shattered dressing. The original adzed tooling can be readily distinguished. One of the fragments retains a patch of very hard adhering mortar that probably relates to the initial use of the stone rather than its reuse. These observations support the probability that this is reused Roman stone.

3 Potential

As outlined within section 2 above.

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