# Short Report:

# A medieval anthropomorphic knife handle from Cambridge

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**Introduction**

Object number 1922.371 was acquired by the University of Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in 1922. According to the initial identification made by the Rev. A C Yorke in the early 1900s, the object is a "dagar knyffe" handle. Dr. M R James dated it to the 14th century. The available information indicates that the object was found in Cambridgeshire, dug up from "the great moor of Fowlmere" (Yorke 1904). This means that it was found, not excavated, so there is no archaeological context to draw upon when researching the object. Instead it was necessary to look at historical, archaeological and material culture studies of the time period and region.

**About the Object**

The object (Figs. 1–4, Plate 8) is 12.2cm tall and 2.4cm wide. It is made of boxwood. The carved figure is holding a jug in one hand and a bag slung over its shoulder in the other. It is wearing robes with the cowl up covering the head. There are faint traces of a hairline or fringe carved on the forehead. The nose is missing, but there are lines where it used to be. The figure's robe is tied at the waist with a rope belt, there are two knots in the belt. There is an oval shaped hole in the bottom of the object, where it looks as if something was originally inserted into the object, and a large keyhole shaped opening at the base. On either side of the keyhole shaped opening are carved toes. The back is roughly carved and part of the surface appears to have splintered off. There are traces of glue on the back where the object would have been mounted for display at some point (Fig. 2, Plate 8), but there is no information on the date of this display. The wood is splitting vertically at the base of the object. Overall the back is rougher and more worn than the front.

**Discussion of Function**

As mentioned above, Rev. A C Yorke identified the object as the handle of a "dagar knyffe," pointing out the keyhole shaped opening at the base "where the crossbar of the 'dagar' passed" (1904, 362). However, the keyhole shaped opening (Fig. 1, Plate 8) where the supposed crossbar would go, is facing the wrong direction for a crossbar. The shape of the hole in the base (Fig. 5) where the blade would be inserted suggests that the blade would go in with the flat side facing the front (the direction the figure is facing) and the edges of the blade would align with the side of the object. The blade would follow the dotted line on Fig. 5. The opening for the crossbar goes from the front of the object to the back. The crossbar would follow the solid line on Fig. 5. This means that it would be perpendicular to the flat side of the blade. In all examples of knives, the crossbar is always parallel to the flat side of the blade. If we consider how blades are used this makes sense. When sliding a knife or dagger into a scabbard or sheath, you would want the flat side of the blade resting against your body. This is not possible if the crossbar is perpendicular to the flat side of the blade, because it would poke into the wearer's body. It is therefore unlikely that there was ever a crossbar, although it is still likely the object was a knife handle.

The object would have been a handle for a whittle-tang knife, not a scale-tang knife, as there are no rivet holes. Whittle-tang knife handles were often secured using hilt bands at the base where the handle ended and the blade began (Cowgill 1987, 9, 25). The carving of the figure does not take up the whole length of the object, there is still almost a centimetre of undecorated wood after the carved toes of the figure (Figs. 1 and 3, Plate 8). This extra space might have been to secure a hilt band without obscuring any of the carving. The hole at the base where the blade would have been inserted to the handle only extends 2cm into the 12.2cm handle. Although this seems as if it would make for poor usage "during the 12th and 13th centuries the tangs normally penetrate only a short distance into the handle" (Cowgill 1987, 25). Further evidence pointing to the object being a whittle-tang knife handle is the fact that most whittle-tang handles were cylindrical in shape, as is object number 1922.371 (Fig. 5). The weakness of the construction of this knife may indicate that it was less a functional object than for display.

People in medieval times carried knives on their person, knives which were often personalized (den



***Top left: Figure 1.*** *Front of handle. MAA, 1922.371. See also Plate 8.*

***Top right: Figure 2.*** *Back of handle. MAA, 1922.371. See also Plate 8.*

***Far left: Figure 3.*** *Right side of handle. MAA, 1922.371. See also Plate 8.*

***Left: Figure 4.*** *Left side of handle. MAA, 1922.371. See also Plate 8.*

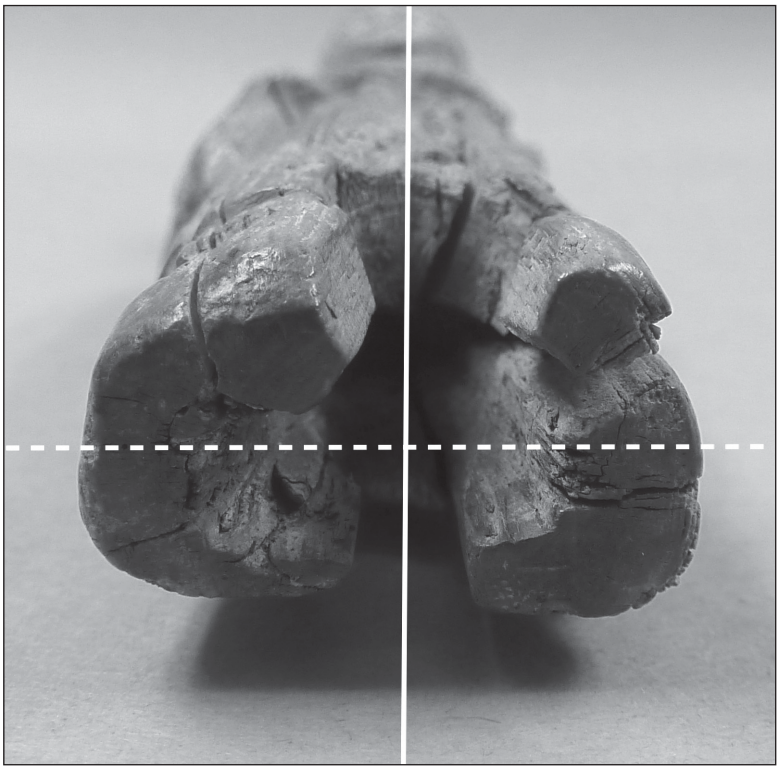

***Figure 5.*** *Bottom of handle with directional markings. MAA, 1922.371.*

Hartog 2012, 7). Although knife handles could be made of wood, bone, metal and horn (den Hartog 2012, 7, Cowgill,1987, 25), wood was the most commonly used material. In a study of 85 medieval knife handles in the Museum of London's collection, 61 were made of wood. Of those, 26 were made of boxwood (Cowgill 1987, 24) like object number 1922.371. The majority (14) of the boxwood handles were dated to the late 14th century, which lends support to M R James' original dating of the object to the 14th century. Anthropomorphic knife handles made from bone and ivory were common throughout the 14th century (den Hartog 2012, 9), so it is probable that wooden anthropomorphic handles were also in circulation.

**Discussion of Iconography**

The object portrays a religious figure and so iconography can perhaps provide us with some more information about it. Although it is not uncommon for saints to be represented on practical items, no saints are commonly depicted with a jug and a sack, making it unlikely the object is meant to represent a saint.

The figure's robe with the cowl up (Figs. 3 and 4, Plate 8), rope belt (Fig. 1, Plate 8), and visible toes (Fig. 1, Plate 8) suggests that the figure is a mendicant. Mendicants, also known as friars, were members of mendicant religious orders, who arrived in England in the 13th century (Burton 1994). They took vows of poverty, often begging and relying on wealthy benefactors to support themselves and their orders (Burton 1994). Rev. A C Yorke also identified the object as a "begging friar" figure (Yorke 1904, 362). Unlike monks who remained isolated in their monasteries, friars mixed with the secular world, travelling frequently (Burton 1994). This means that they would have been a common sight in towns and on roads. The four main mendicant orders in Britain were the Franciscans (Friars Minor), the Dominicans (Friars Preacher, or Black Friars), the Augustinian (Austin) Friars, and the Carmelites (the White Friars). All four orders were present in Cambridge by the 14th century (Burton 1994, 116–117), so it is entirely possible that they provided inspiration to local craftspeople.

Could the fact that it represents a friar be an indication that it was owned by a friar? I find this unlikely. A study of the material culture of mendicants in late medieval East Anglia indicated that decoration usually focused on saints and other religious symbols (Vinten Mattich 1995). Because of their urban locations, and their destruction during the Dissolution, the material culture of mendicant communities rarely survives (Vinten Mattich 1995, King 2007, 169). Examples of decoration in mendicant buildings that survive include images of saints, particularly those important to their particular order, angels, or mystical images like the cross or tree of life. The Dominicans had some murals showing friars in pursuits like prayer and study and wood carvings and friary seals feature the same types of imagery (Vinten Mattich 1995). Friary seals showed mostly religious iconography like saints, churches, Christ, the Virgin Mary, etc., but in a few cases they featured kneeling friars. Some decorations featured the heraldry of benefactors (Vinten Mattich 1995, King 2007). A study of medieval mendicant glass showed similar images of saints, benefactors, and the occasional

friar's head (King 2007). It does not appear to be common for the mendicants to have representations of themselves. The object under discussion does not fit this pattern of medieval mendicant material culture in the region it was found, and it is therefore unlikely that it belonged to a mendicant or was related to a friary's activities.

Out of all of the religious mendicant orders, the clothing of the Franciscans is the closest fit to what the figure is wearing. Franciscans wore a grey (then, later brown) habit with a hood, and a rope belt with three knots, and went barefoot or wore sandals (Citaliarestauro.com 2018). The object figure is wearing a habit with a hood, has a rope belt, and has visible toes suggesting bare feet or sandals. The only problem with this is that there are only two knots in the belt of the figure, and Franciscan belts have three knots symbolizing the three vows they take upon entering the order: poverty, chastity, and obedience (Citaliarestauro.com, 2018). If the object was meant to be a Franciscan, it is possible that a knot was left off as a way to satirize and critique the Franciscans. The object shows a friar holding a jug and carrying a sack over his shoulder (Figs. 1–4). Both of these things contradict the idea of voluntary poverty and deprivation. I think the missing knot is probably a mockery of the vow of poverty and apostolic lifestyle the friars were supposed to observe. Friaries in England flourished with the help of benefactors (Burton 1994), their mendicancy eventually becoming "a mock and pretence" (Bond 1910, 165). Franciscans in particular were caricatured "for their love of good food and alcohol" (Rayborn 2014, 3).

Antifraternalism is the "opposition to mendicant friars" (Geltner 2012, 1). Antifraternal sentiments were not limited to the lay population but were also found within the Church itself. They developed in the mid-13th century and became increasingly prevalent in the centuries that followed (Rayborn 2014, 4). In 14th century Cambridge, there was the added tension between the university and the friaries over competition for students (Moorman 1952). Antifraternalism appeared in medieval art, literature, music, and religious sermons (Rayborn 2014, 4). Prominent English literary examples include *The Summoner's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer and *Piers Plowman* by William Langland (Rayborn 2014). In general, much of the critique of the friars focused on religious hypocrisy and greed (Rayborn 2014). The fact that the figure is holding a jug and sack could be a way of symbolizing greed.

There was tension between religious orders within the Catholic Church in England. Bond states that "monks hated friars, and despised the secular clergy … the parish priest hated monk and friar alike" (Bond 1910, 162). Some argue that this led to ecclesiastical art being used as "weapons of offence, wielded by Christian against Christian" (Bond 1910, pp. 162), although others, like Bond, see this as an exaggeration. Surprisingly, satirical images did make their way into medieval churches, particularly in the form of misericords. Misericords are carved undersides of seats in the choir stalls of churches which provide a small ledge for people to lean against when standing during church services. Artists depicted scenes from everyday life like trades and agricultural activities, dancing and celebrating, as well as animals, leaves and flowers, mythical creatures, scenes from popular stories, and Biblical scenes (Bond 1910, Kraus and Kraus 1975, Laird 1986). Misericords were only visible when the seat was turned up. One source mentions "the preaching and mendicant friars" as an opinion expressed by the carvers (Bond 1910, viii). This suggests that there is at least one example of satire of mendicants in church carvings. Bond argues that these carvings were meant to satirize preaching by mendicants by other members of the church. In many of these cases the mendicant is represented as a fox in friar's clothing (Bond 1910, 165). The misericord carving illustration in Fig. 6 has some similarities with object number 1922.371. The fox friar in Fig. 6 is holding a goose in one hand and has a rabbit slung over his shoulder in the other. This parallels the object which had a jug in one hand and a sack slung over its shoulder with the other. The goose and rabbit are no doubt meant to represent plenty and gluttony, and perhaps the same can be said for the jug and sack of object number 1922.371. I think object number 1922.371 fits into this satirical religious carving tradition which was often directed at friars.


***Figure 6.*** *Illustration of misericord carving from* 'Wood Carvings in English Churches, I – Misericords', *(Bond 1910, 165).*

## Conclusion

The shape of the base, depth of the hole and space for a hilt band, support the original identification of the object as being the handle of a "dagar knyffe". A closer inspection focusing on the construction and functional aspects of the object was able to narrow this to the handle of a whittle-tang knife specifically and revealed problems with the original crossbar theory. Iconographic and historical analysis provided further information; it is very possible the figure is an example of antifraternalism meant to caricature and criticize friars. The popularity of anthropomorphic handles, the prevalence of antifraternal carvings at the time, and the antifraternal tensions in Cambridge support this theory.

Our knowledge of the past is shaped by what survives and what people consider worth saving, making the archaeological record incomplete. When it comes to under-researched objects it becomes necessary to take creative, multi-disciplinary approaches when studying them. There are still avenues of research to explore regarding object number 1922.371. I worked under the assumption that the object is medieval but future investigation focusing on the early modern folk-art angle might yield some interesting information.

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