

A late medieval seal-die from Overton, Hampshire

By C K Currie, with contributions by Neil Rushton and David Williams

Abstract

A late medieval copper alloy seal-die was found during excavations in Overton churchyard. It depicts a hare and was in very good condition. It was found in association with evidence for activity that may be connected with the rebuilding of the church in the 14th century.

Introduction

A copper alloy seal-die was found during archaeological recording in the churchyard of St. Mary's Church, Overton. These recording works were carried out during groundworks and grave clearance to prepare an area to the immediate north of the church for a new village hall. The find was made in context 98, the fill of a suspected 14th-century quarry pit (feature number 93). The context itself was of some interest, and a short description of the circumstances of the find is made here as additional background information.

Historical background (Fig. 1)

Overton church stands 150m to the north of the River Test at a height of 90m AOD, on the opposite bank of the river to the small market town of Overton. The subsoil is chalk, covered in a dark loam.

Overton is first mentioned in two 10th-century Saxon charters granting royal land there to the Old Minster at Winchester, later Winchester Cathedral (Sawyer 1968, nos. 377, 824). After the Norman Conquest, the estate became part of the lands of the bishops of Winchester. It is possible that a royal grant of a market in 1218 signaled the beginnings of the medieval new town founded there by the bishop (Brough 1911, 211; Beresford 1959, 195-7). This appears to have been a similar 'double' settlement to the new bishopric towns at New Alresford, Hampshire, and Downton, Wiltshire, whereby the town was sited on the opposite side of the river to the original Saxon settlement (Beresford 1959, 195-7).

According to Beresford (1959, 214), the original settlement around the church, to the north of the new town, had vanished by the early 14th century. However, the bishops seem to have continued to hold their local courts at their manor house, Court Farm, next to the church, throughout the medieval period (Roberts 1997).

The church itself is larger than average by the standards of the county of Hampshire. This is probably the result of it being a bishopric manor. The earliest fabric of the church seems to date from the late 12th century, although the majority of the present building dates from the later 13th-15th centuries. Both aisles and the chancel seem to have been rebuilt in the first half of this period, with lesser alterations in the second half. The exterior was much restored in the Victorian period, and in 1908 the west tower was rebuilt (Brough 1911, 216-7).

Summary of the results of the archaeological recording (Figs. 2 & 3)

Burial on the north side of Overton church does not seem to have been begun to any extent until 1790, when the Reverend Robert Thomas, 'Vicar' of Overton, was buried there. This seems to have set an example to the local community, and a number of prominent local families were buried within the excavation area thereafter. No evidence for any earlier burial in the area was found, confirming the results of an evaluation undertaken in 1995 (Currie 1995). This may be attributed to the superstition that it was unlucky to be buried on the north side of the church (Bailey 1987, 164).

The most interesting discovery on the site was an extensive scatter of large medieval pits, beneath the post-medieval burials. A number of these pits were between two and three metres across. These were mainly concentrated in the SW corner of the excavation area, with occasional smaller examples elsewhere. Although the earliest pits may have originated from the 11th/12th centuries, the majority seems to date from the later medieval period. None of the pits contained burials, and were thought to be

mainly quarry pits. These seem to have been dug to no set pattern over a period of about 150 years during the 13th-14th centuries, for the extraction of chalk, possibly for making lime or for use in chalk cob construction. A large chalk cob wall existed on the west side of the churchyard that was still present in the mid 1950s. It can be seen in old photographs in Oram (n.d., 12-14).

Evidence that this pit-digging activity was connected with building work on the church was found. A pit full of mason's stone chippings, a circular pit tentatively interpreted as used for bell-founding, and other slight evidence of industrial-type activity was found in pit fills. The stone chippings were of a greenish malmstone-type stone found in the walls of both aisles and the chancel. These parts of the church have been dated mainly to the 14th century, with relatively minor alterations in the 15th century. This coincides approximately with the late medieval date for the pottery and other finds from the suspected quarry pits. Further details of the excavations can be found in the archive report (Currie 1998; Hampshire Museum Accession number A1995.30, Box 2).

This evidence led the excavator to conclude that the area to the north of Overton church, being taboo for burial in the medieval period, may have been used as a building site for construction work on the church. This discovery leads on to suggest that it is possible that the north side of other churches may be a productive area to look for evidence for the organisation of building programmes on these important buildings.

The late medieval seal-die (Fig. 4) by C K Currie, Neil Rushton, & David Williams

A copper alloy seal-die of hexagonal form with a pierced conical handle. The end of the handle forms a triangular point. Height 175mm, diameter 170mm. Hare (or rabbit) motif in centre, and incised lettering around the rim. The inscription is marked *SOHOV IE? LEVET*. The condition of the find was very good; its near mint condition suggesting it had not been in use for long before being lost. A number of similar seal-dies of 14th-century date in the British Museum depicting hares, and using the word *SOHOV* in the inscription. This is apparently a hunting cry (Tonnochy 1952, 152-53), used when releasing the hounds. Its modern equivalent would be similar to 'tallyho'. The *LEVET* is probably a reference to the hare. Hare-coursing was a popular sport amongst the upper classes in the medieval period.

David Williams reports that a seal-die depicting a rabbit or hare, with the inscription *SOHOV ROBIN*** was reported in *The Searcher* for September 1991. This find was made by the Stour Valley Metal Detector Club, and so may originate from Dorset. From his experience it seems that rabbits and hares are the chosen animals on seals beginning *SOHOU* (David Williams, letter to the author, 12-6-98).

Although there is a possibility that the die was redeposited from a medieval burial or from elsewhere on the site, its good condition suggests it was found in its original deposit. Such an item would have belonged to a person of some standing. It was found within an area that appears to have been used by workmen carrying out major rebuilding work on the church. This offers the possibility that the seal-die may have been lost by an official of the bishop of Winchester.

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