A Recently Discovered Romanesque Gravecover from Lincoln and its Local Affiliations

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In 1985 Mr. B. Gilmour noted an interesting stone in the rockery belonging to what was then a nursing home, but which was formerly St. Botolph's Vicarage in South Lincoln (at SK 973 696). This note describes this remarkable stone and discusses its local and regional significance.

The stone is a gravecover of coped form cut from a piece of fine, even grained, oolitic limestone of the sort which was clearly available from local quarries in the middle ages. It now measures 78 x 24 x 24 cm. but was originally of uncertain length, some 28 cm tall at the ridge and some 30 cm broad. This reduction in size is almost entirely due to the stone being trimmed back for reuse as a window sill. When this recutting took place we cannot be sure, but the window in which the stone was reused was probably of late-medieval or early post-medieval date. The masons who undertook this reuse trimmed the coped 'lid', one of the long sides and one of the ends, so that what survives from the original gravecover is the majority of one long side, a corresponding length of one side of the coped 'lid' (although the ridge itself is missing) and one decorated end panel which has lost both its sides and lid on the right hand side. The stone is weathered on all surfaces, except the base, but the recut surfaces appear less weathered than do those decorated with sculpture. The stone was, then, already weathered when it was reused in the window sill.

Description

The gravecover took the form of a long low [chest] with a coped lid. The walls of this chest were designed to be visible as well as the lid and consequently are also decorated with sculpture. There were originally six visible and potentially decorated surfaces (two long walls, two gable ends and the two panels which formed the lid, joining at the ridge) of these six only three survive, and those only in part. The panels of the sculpted lid were defined by a roll-moulded border along the junction with the walls and it is likely that a similar roll formed the ridge rib of the lid as well. There appears to have been no such moulding along the upright angles between the walls and the gable ends.

The surviving wall (Fig. 1) is decorated with a single motif of interlocking rings. The design is well laid out and executed in quite bold relief, each ring is itself decorated with concentric incisions within which are small pellets.

The surviving gable panel (Fig. 2) is occupied entirely by a grotesque mask from the mouth of which issues foliage. The face of the mask is half missing but the rounded cheek, broad nose and surviving bulging eye, with drilled pupil, are quite comprehensible in spite of later damage and recutting. The foliage falling from the mouth is arranged symmetrically. Sprays of acanthus emerge left and right from the corners of the mouth. The tips of the leaves in the right-hand spray fall forward rather awkardly, below a tendril which rises towards the junction between the wall and the lid. These details are missing on the other side, but we may presume a symmetrical arrangement. From the centre of the mouth three flat leaves, originally decorated with pellets along their stems, fall downward to fill the space between the mask and the base of the stone.

Although one sloping surface of the lid does survive in part (Fig. 3) its decoration is more difficult to understand, partly because so much of the panel is missing (both along the top and at the left-hand end) and partly because this surface has been more greatly eroded by the weather than the other two. The irregular hollows do conceal the occasional detail, in places the tips and stalks of acanthus foliage can be understood. Where the detail is comprehensible, the design seems to become more close
towards the ridge, perhaps suggesting that it was originally symmetrical about the ridge rib.

Origin:

The origin of the St. Botolph’s stone is unfortunately uncertain; no records of its discovery have come to light. However, the strongest contender for its original site must be the Hospital of the Holy Innocents, otherwise known as the Malandry. This major leper hospital was probably founded in the early twelfth century (VCH Lines II, 230; Brooks 1934) and occupied a rectangular precinct whose site, although now subdivided, is still perpetuated as a block of occupied land extending southwards into the unenclosed South Common (Fig. 4). Part of this site was adopted in 1891 as the site of St. Botolph’s Vicarage (LAO/Pax/6) and the most simple explanation for the stone now in the former vicarage garden must be that it came from the institution which previously occupied the site.

Although we know very little about the physical appearance of the Malandry, we do know that there was an important burial ground in the southern part of the precinct, which was cut through by the Lincoln to Grantham railway line in 1875. On this occasion a very fine fourteenth-century grave cover commemorating Jueyt de Rauceby was recovered (AASR VIII, 1876, xi. This stone is now in St. Denis’ Street), and, more recently, in 1982, a less elaborate late twelfth/early thirteenth century grave cover with a floriate cross found on the site was presented to the City and County Museum (A. White, pers. comm.). This burial ground was presumably attached to the conventual church, but the relationship of this church with the adjacent parish church of the Holy Innocents is unclear. It may be that the chapel of St. Mary Magdalen at the Malandry was within the parish church, or alternatively, it could have been a part (or the whole) of a separate conventual church serving the hospital (Venables 1888,

It seems most likely, then, that the recently discovered grave cover came originally from the graveyard of the Malandry, and may (for example) have been discovered during the disturbances of 1875. It had, however, been reused in the late or early post-medieval period in a major window, prior to its serving as a garden ornament and this raises the possibility of an alternative explanation, that the piece was recovered from the fabric of St. Botolph’s church either when a vestry was added in 1861-2 or when the whole body of the church (except parts of the nave west and chancel south walls) was rebuilt in 1878-9 (LAO Fac/1861/9; Fac/1878/17). It is quite possible that the stone was recovered during one of these episodes and taken to the rectory garden for safekeeping. Even so, we have no records of such a discovery or transfer and the more simple explanation, that the stone is from the Malandry itself and was recovered in modern times after being reused in the fabric of a late building on the site, is probably preferable.

Discussion:

The grave cover from St. Botolph’s belongs to a small group of elaborately decorated stones which were designed to mark single burial sites within graveyards. The earliest such graveyard monuments in eastern England probably belong to the tenth century, although specialised types of monument were in use earlier. Broadly speaking two traditions of such monuments seem to exist in parallel throughout the period between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. These two traditions can be characterised as the cuped and the flat stones. The cuped stone tradition, to which the St. Botolph’s example belongs, is often said to originate in representations of ‘houses’ of the dead, a popular concept with its beginnings in the classical period (Bailey 1980, 92-7; Lang 1984, 90-7). Such ‘house-like'
monuments take the form of a stone with four 'walls' and a pitched 'roof'. Indeed, between the late ninth and twelfth centuries, these 'hagheak' monuments frequently have 'roofs' carved to represent wooden shingles, and a late example of this type of monument was excavated at St. Mark's church, half a mile further north in Wigford (Stocker 1986, 58, 71, fig. 58).

Alongside this group of coped stones decorated to represent houses, however, there are also a number which are decorated with other devices whilst retaining their coped shape. Of this small group of monuments a number can be found within 30 miles of Lincoln. The group is related to the well-known 'hagheak' series (Lang 1984), but they represent a continuation or variation of it. The group includes stones at Shelton (2 stones) and Hickling Notts. (Hill 1916, 204-6; Lang 1984, 140-1), Lincoln St. Mark's and Cranwell Lincs. (Stocker 1986, 58-9; Eversen and Stocker forthcoming) and Conisborough South Yorks (Butler 1964, 126-7) (Fig. 5). All of these pieces are from 'chest' type gravecovers with coped lids and, with the exception of the stone from Conisborough, all are of the tenth or eleventh centuries. Given this range of dates, clearly, the St. Botolph's stone stands, like the Conisborough stone, at the end of the tradition of elaborately decorated 'coped chest' type monuments. By the time it was carved, coped covers were more commonly designed to lie flush with the ground surface and were almost always more simply decorated. Covers like the low, ground-level coped covers from St. Mark's, Lincoln (Stocker 1986 Nos. 52-69), with more restrained decoration, were to become the popular standard from the late twelfth century.

The elaborate decoration on the St. Botolph's cover allows us to date it to c.1150-70. The foliage mask on the gable end is a common character in Romanesque architectural decoration and can be found locally, for example, in the foliate string course at St. Mary's Guildhall in Wigford, Lincoln. This foliate mask (like, for example, those known from the cathedral in Lincoln - Venables 1883 and those from St. Mark's - Stocker 1986, 45-6, fig. 37) share with the St. Botolph's gravecover similar bulging eyes with drilled pupils and similarly rounded cheeks. Such stylised masks are not common on gravecovers, but the interlacing foliage design on a flat stone (which is usually considered to be a gravecover) from St. Peter's Northampton does have such a mask, again with foliage trailing emerging from its mouth (Zarnecki 1953, 19, fig. 18). In both the Northampton and the St. Botolph's cases it would be unwise to see this mask as signifying anything in iconographic terms. It is simply a common device in Romanesque foliage sculpture (and indeed in other media) and is of no more than decorative importance.

What survives of the acanthus leaves issuing from the mouth of the mask in the gable of the St. Botolph's piece (and indeed what can be understood of the details on the lid) also find good parallels in foliage trails and in certain capitals at St. Mary's Guildhall. The comparable details at the cathedral all belong to the period of refurbishment which began after a fire in the early 1140s, and which probably took place during the 1150s. The sculpture at St. Mark's and St. Mary's Guildhall is by comparison with the cathedral work to the period between 1150 and 1170 (Magilton & Stocker 1982, Stocker 1986, 45-52). These parallels must fix the date for the St. Botolph's piece within the third quarter of the twelfth century.

In contrast with the Northampton slab, the high quality carvings of a bishop and a knight on the side of the Conisborough chest, and the roundels on its lid, are likely to have some iconographic meaning, although partly because of the damaged condition of the lid, it has not been clarified. The sculpture on the lid of this stone is, like the side of the St. Botolph's stone, based on a system of roundels, but here they are used as fields for a series of minor sculptures (all now badly weathered) which may originally have represented signs of the zodiac or similar subjects. Although this important sculpture still awaits elucidation these roundels must be related to the portal carvings at a number of churches in the Vale of York (most recently considered by Butler 1984). These subject panels on the lid of the Conisborough stone are set within a pattern of acanthus foliage trails, and, as the remains of such trails are now all that is comprehensible on the lid of the St. Botolph's stone, we should be aware of the possibility that this stone also had some such arrangement of panels on its lid.

The interlinked rings along the side of the St. Botolph piece also find stylistic parallels at the same date locally. They occur, for example, in the tympanum at the church of Bishop Norton, which is dated to the middle years of the twelfth century (Binnall 1961). But of particular importance in this context are two other Lincoln monuments which also have such interlinked circles along the sides of their chests. These are the coffin from the cathedral which was discovered outside the east end of the Angel Choir in the mid-eighteenth century (Gough 1786, I, lili; Zarnecki 1970, 21) (fig. 6) and the recently excavated flat gravecover or coffin lid from St. Mark's (Stocker 1986, 62-3, 69, fig. 55) (fig. 7). It has been suggested that both of these items were originally from similar types of monument. Both seem to have been designed to stand to a considerable height above ground level, up against a wall and probably inside a church building. The sides of both chests when complete were decorated, evidently, with a zone of interlinked rings. A once-line cover at Stainton-in-the-Vale (Notts.) seems also to have belonged to this group. Although recut when it

Fig. 5 Sculpted gravecover at St. Peter's Conisborough, South Yorkshire. (D.A. Stocker.)
was reused as a ledger stone in the fourteenth century, it originally had a flat lid decorated with a simple cross patte and at least one wall and the head end were decorated with a simple interlocking arcading.

When these three monuments are considered along with the newly discovered piece we can move towards the definition of a local group of chests decorated in this similar way. All date from the third quarter of the twelfth century and are chests with decorated lids, sides and gables, standing to a considerable height above ground level. We do not know what form the lid of the cathedral coffin took, but the St. Mark’s monument lid was decorated with a series of plain circular panels in ascending order of size. Like the example at Stauton, this is a flat lid whereas the copped lid of the St. Botolph’s slab required a different type of decoration: one which finds a closer parallel in the stone from Conisborough and which, perhaps, looks backward towards tenth-century ‘hogback’ sculpture. The sides of all three Lincoln chests are decorated with interlinked circles. In the case of the cathedral coffin, the body of the deceased was placed within the ‘chest’ above ground, and this may have been the arrangement both with the Stauton slab and the monument represented by the fragment from St Mark’s (Stocker 1986, 62-3 fig. 44), but we may doubt whether this was the case with the St. Botolph’s stone. Because it was so weathered prior to its reuse in a late medieval window we can guess that it was placed over an interment within a graveyard.

The newly discovered stone seems to belong, therefore, to a small group of elaborately decorated Romanesque ‘chest’ type monuments of the third quarter of the twelfth century. Although there are progenitors elsewhere, and the monument at Conisborough, in particular, provides a parallel both in type and decorative style, the three examples identified so far, at the cathedral, St. Mark’s and St. Botolph’s, do appear to form a distinctive Lincoln group of early memorials.

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