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Papal Bullae from Peasholme Green, York

An Insight Report

By Nicola Rogers (with thanks to Dr Tim Pestell for his identifications and comments)

A series of excavations were carried out by York Archaeological Trust in the mid-1980s, in 2012 and again in 2014, in the area of the church and churchyard of All Saints, Peasholme Green, situated close by the Black Swan inn. A church was recorded as being on the site by at least the early 12th century but it was demolished in the late 16th century. In all three seasons of excavations, burials were identified and recovered; in 1986 work revealed a robber trench of the north wall of the nave and also at least 75 burials and charnel pits within the church itself. A further 500 burials were recorded and removed during operations in 2012 and 2014.

Amongst the artefacts recovered from the excavations, some of the most interesting were three lead-alloy objects, all of which were found either in or associated with burials. These objects are all papal bullae, metal seals which take their name from official papal documents sent out from Rome to which they would originally have been attached. Lead seals were restricted to use on papal documents only; the seal acted as a means of authentication of the document, and it is believed that lead was used because the heat often experienced in Italy, where the pope resided, would have melted wax seals. As with other types of seal, the bulla would have been attached to the document via a silk ribbon which passed vertically through holes at the top and bottom of the seal. Bullae were issued by popes from the 6th century onwards, but the characteristic design employed for centuries and up to modern times was defined at the beginning of the 12th century by Pope Pascal II. On the front are the faces of Saints Peter (on the right as we look) and Paul, separated by a cross; Peter is always represented with a crimped beard and curly hair, while Paul has short or no hair and a long beard. The faces are both encircled by a beaded border and above them are their abbreviated names: SPA(UL) and SPE(TER). On the reverse face the name and number of the issuing pope would be recorded followed by the letters PP ('Pastor Pastorum' or 'Shepherd of the Shepherds').

Two of the bullae were found in 1986, both from inside the church. One (SF142) was found in the left hand of an adult burial which was located within the north aisle of the church towards the east end, probably close to a chantry chapel or the altar. The second bulla (SF123) seems to have been associated with a disturbed burial situated towards the west end of the aisle – the burial appeared to have been affected by a later inhumation in the same location. The names of the issuing popes are legible on both bullae, although the numbers are not clear; fortunately other small features in the designs have enabled identification of the individual popes of both. SF142 was made in the reign of Pope Clement VI (Pope 1342–1352) and SF123 in the reign of Pope Urban VI (1378–1389).

The third bulla was found in 2012 (SF309), and was retrieved from within the torso of an adult skeleton, which was located in what appears to have been a coffined burial around 5m away from the south side of the church, almost directly south of the middle of the building. This example was clearly identifiable as being issued by Pope Urban VI, the same pope responsible for one of the bullae found in 1986 (SF123).



Figure 1: Papal bulla (SF309) obverse before conservation treatment



Figure 2: Papal bulla (SF309) obverse after conservation treatment



Figure 3: Papal bulla (SF309) reverse before conservation treatment



Figure 4: Papal bulla (SF309) reverse after conservation treatment

It has been suggested that bullae found in graves were most likely to have been attached originally to pardons or ‘indulgences’; these papal documents offered a pardon for a lifetime’s sins and eased the passage of the soul through Purgatory. Sold by men known as ‘Pardoners’, this trade became notorious for corrupt selling, and in the 14th century accusations of forgeries of papal seals were rife. This is reflected in Chaucer’s Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*, who is depicted as a man who preaches solely to get money and who readily admits his ‘relics’ are fake ‘pigges bones’. The mid-14th-century Bishop of Carlisle,

John Kirkby, insisted that as bishop, he must examine the papal letters carried by any Pardoners intending to publish indulgences, as he had learned of some in his bishopric who possessed fabricated (i.e. forged) letters, and he believed money was being extorted from 'the simple'. In addition to forgeries, there may even have been smuggling of papal bulls; a surviving document of 1384 contains an order requiring two men – Robert de Rellingham and William Carter – to make a search for papal bulls, and also gold, thought to have been illegally entering the country through Scarborough. The only other bulla recovered from excavations by YAT – found at the site of St Leonard's Hospital – was studied by an expert at the time of its finding in 2003, who noted inconsistencies in the shapes of the letters spelling out the late 12th-century pope's name, suggesting that it might therefore be a forgery. At this stage we don't know if the Peasholme Green bullae might also be forgeries, and we can't know if they were originally attached to their documents, which would not have survived burial; it seems most likely, however, that it was the seal itself as much as the document that had meaning to those buried with them. The importance to these particular individuals is clearly undeniable, with one clutching theirs in their hand, and another having the bulla placed on the chest.

All of the individuals buried with the bullae are likely to have been members of locally important families; whilst canon law decreed that all burials should be free to parishioners, burial within or very close to the church seems generally to have been restricted to those of some status, including clerics, but also those who may have been benefactors of the church itself. The person who held their bulla in their hand when they were buried close to a chantry chapel or the high altar (SF142) would have been a particularly significant member of the local community, judging by the highly favoured location of their final resting place. Although SF309 was found in association with a burial outside the church, it was nevertheless very close to the building itself, and the presence of a coffin may also indicate that this individual was of some status, as most burials in the churchyard were usually uncoffined.

A study of medieval monastic cemeteries published in 2005 noted that although all bullae recovered archaeologically in Britain range in date from the 12th to the 15th century, of almost 30 known to have been found in burials, none had been identified as earlier than the papacy of John XXII (1316–34) and none appeared to date later than 1431. Analysis indicated that bullae were found with both genders, and often in burials within the church. It also noted that the seven examples which came from burials associated with parish churches were all issued between 1342 and 1378, a period during which the plague pandemic we know as 'The Black Death' was rampant in England. This total of seven included one of the Peasholme Green bullae; today's total of three from the same cemetery in York now brings that British total to at least nine, and doubtless some others have also been recovered elsewhere in the country during the last ten years. The identification of two of the York seals as being produced for Pope Urban VI now extends the period of issue of bullae found in parish church burials to 1342–1389.



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