THE PRE-CONQUEST COFFINS FROM 12-18 SWINEGATE AND 18 BACK SWINEGATE

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WEB BASED REPORT

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 2
THE SWINEGATE EXCAVATIONS .............................................................................................. 2
THE RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATIONS ....................................................................................... 3
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................ 7
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .............................................................................................................. 7
FIGURES: Pages 8-9

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INTRODUCTION

This report relates to two of York Archaeological Trust’s excavations, the first at 12-18 Swinegate and the second at 14 Little Stonegate and 18 Back Swinegate (Figure 1). These excavations represent two of the most interesting, though little known of the Trust’s excavations. A total of fifteen trenches were excavated (Figure 2), and these revealed a complex sequence of deposits dating from Roman times to the present day. In addition, a number of exceptional artefacts were recovered including a collection of well-preserved wooden coffins of late 9th to early 11th century date, and a group of writing tablets of mid-14th century date.

This is one of three reports prepared with a grant from the Museum Resilience Fund; the other two reports relate to the excavations overall (McComish 2015a), and to the wooden coffins from the site (McComish 2015b).

It is intended that the information in the present report can be used as an introductory text to accompany any documents or exhibitions relating to the conservation of, and research into, the coffins from the site. It aims to give a brief outline of the excavations and to provide the archaeological context for the coffins. The text is not intended as a full academic text, but rather something which can be easily read, and for that reason no academic references are given in the text. Should a reader require such information it is given in McComish 2015a.

THE SWINEGATE EXCAVATIONS

The excavations at 12-18 Swinegate, 14 Little Stonegate and 18 Back Swinegate took place from October 1989 to July 1990 (Figure 1), and they were in advance of the redevelopment of the area for shops and offices. The archaeological potential of the Swinegate area was well known prior to the 1989 excavations. Given that the site lay within both the Roman legionary fortress and the heart of the medieval city, it had the potential to reveal a sequence of deposits spanning the entire history of York.

The site comprised 15 separate trenches that were placed in relation to areas which were going to be destroyed by the foundations and piles of the new buildings at the site. The excavation work was generously funded by the developers of the site, the General Accident Insurance Company, who also funded a predetermined amount of research. In addition, the excavation of Trench 4 was funded directly by York Archaeological Trust. The excavations were directed by N. F. Pearson and the two site supervisors were J. M. Lilley and M. Whyman.

The Swinegate excavations were of immense interest, providing a rare example of a sequence of excavated deposits spanning the entire history of York from the Romans to the present day. Among the many wonderful deposits and artefacts recovered was a group of pre-conquest wooden coffins which are of national importance.

York Archaeological Trust is grateful to the Museum Resilience Fund for providing the opportunity to further research these exceptionally important objects, which deserve to be more widely known.
THE RESULTS OF THE EXCAVATIONS

The earliest deposit seen on the site was naturally occurring clay, which was reached at the base of Trenches 2 and 3, approximately 4.3m below the present ground level.

Roman remains were seen in Trenches 2-5, 9, 12 and 14-15. The earliest features were wooden buildings relating to the construction of the first fortress by the ninth legion around AD 71. These wooden buildings were later replaced by stone buildings and a large courtyard. The stone buildings underwent various alterations from the second half of the second century onwards, and they remained in use until the fourth century.

The various Roman walls were robbed out at some later stage, but the precise date at which this happened is unclear.

The site was then used for the church of St Benet and its associated cemetery. The church is named after a Northumbrian saint, Benedict Biscop, with Benet being an abbreviation of his name. The precise date at which the church was founded is unknown, but it had to be after St Benedict Biscop’s death in 689 and before the late 9th/early 10th century, as coffins of that date were present in the churchyard. No conclusive evidence of the church building was seen in the 1989/1990 excavations, but it probably lay to the immediate north-west of Trenches 14 and 15.

One hundred burials were excavated from within the churchyard. It was impossible to determine the alignments of some of the burials as they were either too fragmentary, or lay largely beyond the limit of excavation. Despite this it was clear that there were a number of differing burial alignments present within the cemetery, ranging from north-north-east/south-south-west to east-north-east/west-south-west. Some of the earliest burials were placed in relation to Roman walls that were still visible above ground level at that time. There were no clusters of male or female adult burials within the St Benet’s cemetery, but the children and infants were mainly located to the south-west of the present Swinegate.

The St Benet’s cemetery fits into a widespread pattern of variable burial rites within a single cemetery that is seen across England from the 9th to 11th centuries. The St Benet’s cemetery included burials in wooden coffins, a burial in a hollowed out log, burials with planks over the skeleton, burials with planks beneath the skeleton, burials in shrouds and burials in simple grave cuts. In addition, there was a single burial with a plank over the top, a limestone grave marker at the head end of the grave, and stones by the head of the skeleton. A burial of an infant had a stones to either side of the head and a plank above. The skeletons were all buried individually in shallow graves, with no shared grave cuts. The skeletons were all laid on their backs (supine) and fully extended, though the position of the hands varied greatly. A single burial was accompanied by grave goods in the form of a knife, a metal buckle and a perforated hone stone.

Wood is rarely well-preserved, so the coffins, the hollowed out log and the planks from this excavation represent truly exceptional finds, of national importance. The coffins had a rather flimsy appearance, and were presumably custom made to transport the body a short distance for burial, as they were not robust enough for long journeys. Some of the coffins in the cemetery were subjected to dendrochronological dating (tree-ring dating), which showed that they ranged from the last quarter of the 9th century to the first quarter of the 11th...
century. A typical coffin prior to excavation, with the lid clearly visible is shown on Plate 2, while a coffin with the lid removed is shown on Plate 3.

A plank above the infant burials with stones to either side of its head is of particular interest as it has a Nine-Men’s-Morris board carved into the upper surface (Plate 1). This game is clearly ancient, but it is unclear at what point it was introduced into Britain. The St Benet’s example is pre-Conquest in date. The game was certainly widely known after the Norman Conquest as there are 18 different examples of this game carved as graffiti into later medieval churches.

Plate 1 The Nine Men’s Morris board carved onto a plank above a child’s burial. Scale unit 0.1m

The churchyard was made smaller in the late 11th or early 12th century when the present street of Swinegate was built, though the cemetery and church continued to exist to the south-west of Swinegate. The area of the former cemetery to the north-west of Swinegate was divided up into tenements which were long thin plots of land that originally extended all the way from Petergate to Swinegate. Each tenement would originally have contained a house fronting onto Petergate, with a back yard to the rear. Swinegate was originally a lane giving access to the rear of these tenements. The back yards were originally separated from one another by wooden fences. The yards were used for any number of purposes, including the location of cess-pits and the disposal of domestic waste, as a result organic deposits built up in all of the back yards.

By the 1220s the church of St Benet had been linked into a single parish with the nearby church of St Sampson, with St Sampson’s acting as the parish church. St Benet’s church went out of use and was demolished between 1299 and 1307. By the 1320s the churchyard of St Benet’s was falling into disrepute as a place of prostitution, and by 1337 the churchyard was described as “lying waste and covered with rubbish”. In 1361 the site of the former church was acquired by the Vicars Choral, who demolished the church and built a row of houses there to rent out, which were known as ‘Benetplace’ or ‘Benet’s Rents’.
The earliest buildings excavated on the Little Stonegate street frontage were of mid-13\textsuperscript{th} century date. These continued in use until the 14\textsuperscript{th} century, and they were associated with the production of copper alloy dress-fittings.
On the Grape Lane frontage the earliest excavated deposits were of 14th century date, and comprised three discrete properties with buildings fronting onto Grape Lane. These properties were associated with copper and iron working, and underwent various phases of alteration from the 14th to 16th centuries.

The earliest buildings along the Back Swinegate frontage were of mid- to late 14th century date, and these appear to represent the first medieval buildings in this area. In common with the buildings on Grape Lane these were associated with evidence for metalworking, in this case copper-working and the production of nails.

The back yards to the north-east of Swinegate continued in use throughout the 13th and 14th centuries. Further organic deposits accumulated within the yards and there were other features typical of back yards including cess-pits, rubbish pits and a barrel lined well. There were also hints of structures in this area including a rough stone sill in Trench 3 that may have represented the threshold of a small building. In Trench 6 there were well-made hearths of edge set tiles and a small beam slot from a building. Trench 7 contained a wall at right angles to the Swinegate street frontage together with associated floors. There was also evidence for the demolition of the Trench 7 building.

The uppermost deposits on the site which were of post-medieval and modern date were machine cleared at the start of excavation.
REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The figures were prepared by K. Weston.
Figure 1: Site Location
Figure 2: Trench Location