

Exciting discoveries at St Mary's Church, North Marston

New Light on Medieval Graffiti: Masons' Marks, Devotional Inscriptions & Ritual Protection Marks (Apotropaics)

The study of medieval graffiti has been in the ascendant over the last few years with popular books recently published on the subject. These mainstream publications have helped to disseminate the new interpretative frameworks and ideas that are the culmination of the last thirty years of academic research into medieval inscriptions. The re-evaluation of medieval graffiti has revealed many more subtleties and interpretations than hitherto imagined.

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Graffiti can span the entire medieval period but appears to peak between AD 1650 –1850 at the height of the Witchcraft persecutions. There are many categories now recognised including masons' marks, devotional and memorial inscriptions and a whole range of apotropaic symbols now believed to represent elements of ritual building protection and counter-witchcraft measures.

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Many of our medieval buildings contain abundant examples of graffiti in many different forms.

St Mary's Church in North Marston was a foci for pilgrims who venerated the tomb of Sir John Schorne and the attendant holy well. The church displays a wide range of graffiti some of which may be related to those pilgrimages.

If you are interested in learning more, or interested in any of the following, please do not hesitate to contact me –

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Medieval Graffiti Survey from St Mary's Church, North Marston



Plate 1: Graffiti incised into the font. A conjoined 'VV' forming a 'W' in this case – often seen inverted as an 'M.' This is one of the most common ritual protection marks in English churches. It is known as a Marian mark as it is meant to invoke the Virgin Mary and now understood to be an apotropaic symbol – NOT- a masons' mark. ©WPerkins2019



Plate 2: Sedilia: a 'R' for 'Regina' (Virgin Mary) with an inverted 'R' below; in some cases inverted letters (or those written backwards) were scratched into the masonry to act as curses or were examples of 'ill-wishing.'. ©WPerkins2019



*Plate 3: Three (possibly more but the wall is heavily eroded) compass drawn circles on the south wall. Once interpreted as Mass Dials, it is now understood many of these designs (Particularly the six-petalled hexafoil bottom right) were meant to evoke the Virgin Mary
©WPerkins2019*



Plate 4: A 'Christogram' consisting of a crossed 'I' representing Jesus (Greek alphabet). To the right, several saltires are present which is a powerful 'barrier' or 'occlusive' symbol ©WPerkins2019

Medieval Graffiti Southwark Cathedral



Plate 1: A pronounced saltire (or partial chi-rho or Greek Cross) carved into crossing arch, Southwark cathedral © WPerkins 2019



Plate 2: A 'Jacob's Ladder' or 'mesh' design, which has been described as a 'spirit trap,' Southwark Cathedral © WPerkins 2019



Plate 3: Latin crosses, some within compass-drawn circle or cartouches, Southwark Cathedral (c) WPerkins 2019



Plate 4: The conjoined 'VV' or Marian mark here in its 'VV' form accompanied with a number of mysterious 'dots.' It has been suggested the dots are a result of intentional erosion of the stone to produce dust for elixirs, Southwark Cathedral (c) WPerkins

Examples of Medieval Graffiti From Elsewhere



*Example 1: The conjoined 'VV' in its 'W' form deeply incised into a door jamb at St Clements, Sandwich, Kent.
©WPerkins2019*



*Example 2: Saltire cross clearly cut into door jamb, west entrance, (another one of similar size is present on the opposing jamb) All Saints church, Worcestershire.
©WPerkins2019*



Example 3: Variation on the compass-drawn circle; concentric rings etched into the Romanesque porch of Notre-Dame-la-Grande, Poitiers, France. ©WPerkins2019



Example 4: Profligate graffiti on the 'Unknown Yorkists Tomb,' Minster, Isle of Sheppey including conjoined 'VV's and many other known apotropaic symbols. Effigies of the famous (as well as of saints) became a focus for graffiti. ©WPerkins2019