

Ritual objects: placed deposits in medieval churches

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Ritual objects

Placed deposits in medieval churches

Roberta Gilchrist

Among his many distinguished contributions to medieval archaeology, Anders Andrén has stimulated new questions on medieval ritual behaviour. This short paper is offered to Anders to mark thirty years of friendship and shared interest in the archaeology of medieval beliefs. It considers placed deposits in British churches, ranging from the ninth century to the Reformation.

The later medieval period sits between two traditions in the study of ritual behaviour. If we look to the preceding period, we see the prolific archaeological study of ‘structured deposition’, ‘odd’ or ‘special deposits’ that has grown up over the past three decades. In summary, an orthodox view has emerged among prehistorians that the deliberate ‘deposition’ of materials, such as the burial of selected objects in a pit, formed part of ritual practice that was integrated with aspects of everyday life (Brück 1999; Garrow 2012). Such deposits are regarded as intentional acts that seem to defy any rational explanation, such as whole pots or animals buried in ditches and pits, or objects placed at critical points in settlements, such as at boundaries, entrances or the corners of houses. This approach began with the study of Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age settlement, and gradually percolated its way through Roman studies to reach medieval archaeology around a decade ago (e.g. Hamerow 2006; Hall 2012).

Post-Reformation studies of deposition focus on concealed objects in buildings, such as clothing, shoes and animals, which are often interpreted as protection against witchcraft. This field of study was advanced by Ralph Merrifield in his 1987 book, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic*, but has remained on the margins of historical scholarship until recently (Hutton 2016). The approach and terminology used to describe post-medieval ritual behaviour are very different to those adopted in the study of its prehistoric antecedents. Historians refer to objects being ‘concealed’, while prehistorians refer to them being ‘placed’. Groups of objects are referred to by historians as ‘caches’ or ‘spiritual middens’, while archaeologists refer to them as ‘structured deposits’. Historians look to documentary sources to explain the social context and motivation behind these ritual acts (Davies 2015), while archaeologists look to theoretical frameworks of person and object agency, and the cultural meanings of specific places selected for deposition (e.g. Bradley 2016). Archaeologists have generally moved away from the simplistic model of foundation and closing deposits,

or single causal explanations, to consider how such ritual acts were part of everyday life (e.g. Bradley 2005; Falk 2008; Hukantaival 2013).

Historians stress the ‘spiritual’, ‘ritual’ and ‘apotropaic’ purposes behind acts of concealment (e.g. Hutton 2016). Paradoxically, medieval archaeologists appear wary of reading any religious intent into ritual behaviour. This is perhaps because they are committed to rescuing these social practices from the pejorative category of ‘superstition’. Does later medieval ritual practice represent a bridge between these two traditions? Or is it stranded between the ‘rock’ of ‘structured deposition’ and the ‘hard place’ of ‘spiritual middens’? Is it possible to determine whether medieval Christian practice is distinctively different from earlier traditions of ‘placement’ and later traditions of ‘concealment’? Is there evidence of any continuity in practice or intent, beyond the deep-rooted and apparently universal impulse for people to bury objects with ritual intent?

Placed deposits – case studies

My aim is to consider placed deposits within the contextual framework of Christian ritual, to trace patterns in the types of object deposited and to begin to establish frameworks of reference in which they may be understood. First, I must stress that such practices are *not* recorded in medieval documents and have therefore fallen outside the boundaries of historical scholarship on popular religion and magic. The question is *why* were such acts in churches not recorded? Is it because they were common place and integral to long-standing popular beliefs? Or is it because they operated unofficially, below the ecclesiastical radar? The key questions are:

- What types of objects were placed in churches and how did they relate to Christian topography and liturgy?
- Can we detect patterns associated with the chronology or use-life of particular buildings?
- Were deposits placed in medieval churches as public or private acts, with licit or illicit intent?

The first of my five examples is the church at Raunds Furnells (Northamptonshire), where excavations in the 1970s and 1980s uncovered a church built at the end of the ninth century on the estate of a local lord (Bodding-

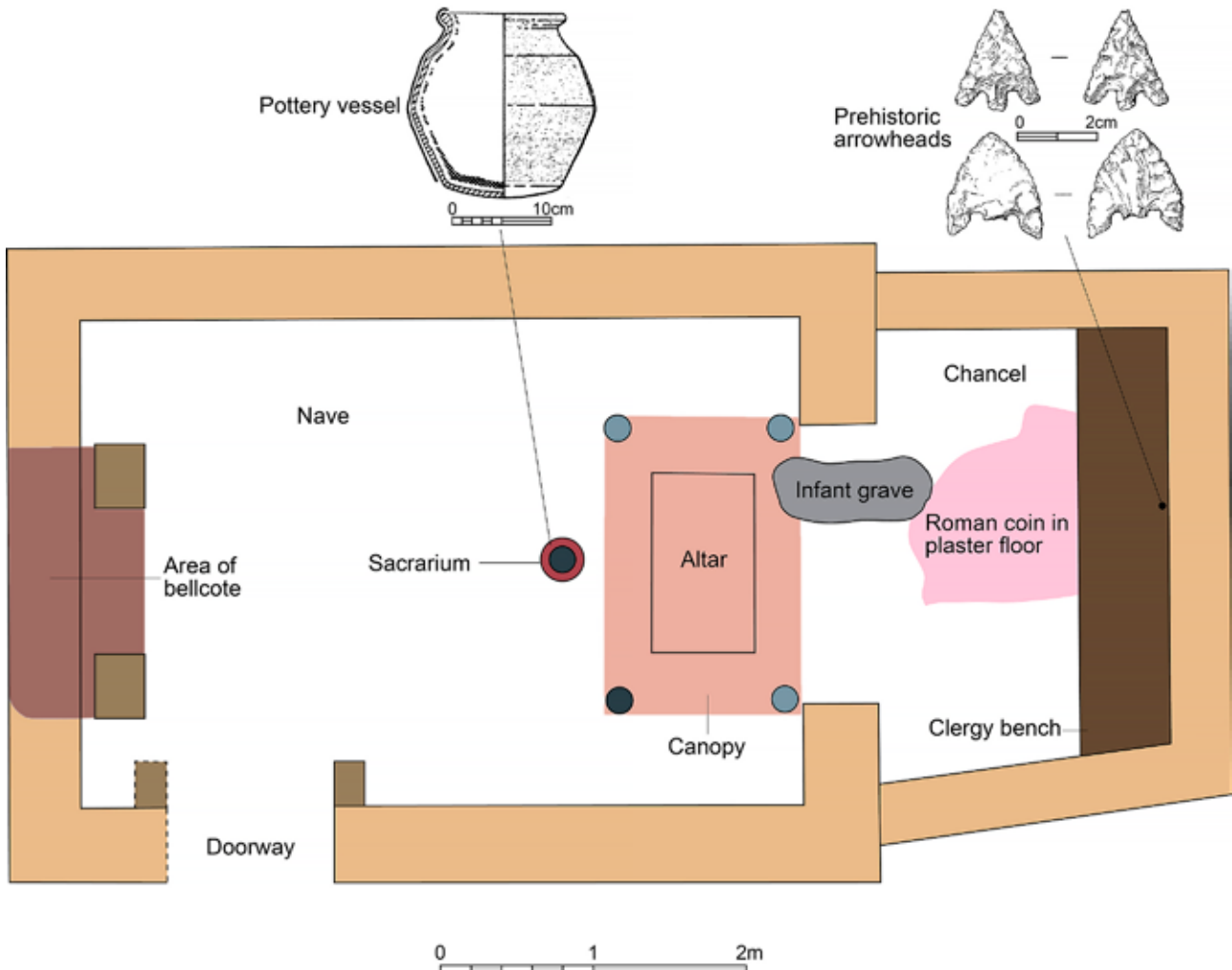


Fig. 1. The church at Raunds Furnell (Northamptonshire), dating from the late ninth century, with chancel added in the mid-tenth century. Placed deposits include a pottery vessel, Roman coin, prehistoric lithics and an infant's grave. Drawing by Sarah Lambert-Gates, after Boddington 1996.

ton 1996). The tiny church was enlarged and then rebuilt before it was converted to a manor house in the twelfth century. A pottery vessel was deposited near the centre of the first phase church; it contained charcoal and the residue of wax made from honeycomb (Fig. 1). It has been suggested that the vessel played an important role in the consecration ceremony, in which ash and wax candles were essential components. It was subsequently used as a *sacrarium* for the disposal of consecrated materials. A chancel was added in the mid-tenth century: a Roman coin and two late Neolithic or early Bronze Age arrowheads were deposited, and an infant's grave was cut into the foundations of the former east wall, in the position of the new chancel arch. This infant grave was the only inhumation within the entire church, suggesting that it too was a placed deposit. Raunds is consistent with the classic definition of placed deposits, the deliberate burial of objects at critical points in a building, in this case the liturgically charged points of the altar, chancel arch and clergy bench (Gilchrist 2014).

Excavations at the church at Barhobble, Mochrum (Galloway) in the 1990s uncovered a lost church built in the twelfth century. This was on the site of an earlier church and cemetery, possibly of monastic origin (Cor-

mack 1995). The placed deposits can be assigned to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. Several objects were recorded in association with the altar: an iron bell, a stone cross fragment, a kaolinite (lithomarge) disc and an iron padlock. Further objects were found in the area of the rood screen: a handful of sea shells, two further stone cross fragments and three coins. Two coins were also found together in a void against the south wall, and a lump of jasper and a copper alloy bolt for a padlock were found under the baked clay floor in the south-west corner. A western compartment, interpreted as possible priests' quarters, yielded further finds: a fragment of stone cross and a haematite burnisher. A lump of decorated iron mail and mineralized textile was found deposited against the north wall of the structure near the north-west corner, within a V-shaped stone setting sunk into the clay floor. The textile was interpreted as a coif or headpiece with linen cap, placed inside a grass bag.

The third example is the nunnery church at Iona, where a group of four silver spoons and a gold fillet from a headdress were found in 1923 (Curle 1924). These were wrapped in linen and placed beneath a stone at the base of the chancel arch. Stylistically the spoons are dated c.1150 and the hair-fillet is thirteenth century. The date

of the deposit is unknown, but the nunnery was founded in 1203, half a century after the spoons were made. A second deposit was buried in the chapel of St Ronan nearby, comprising a gold finger ring and another gold fillet, with the fillet tightly folded up within the circumference of the ring and kept in position by a fragment of wire. When they were found in 1923, the examples from Iona were described as hoards, or perhaps as a thief's booty concealed for later retrieval.

The fourth example shows that objects selected for placement in churches were not always valuable objects made of precious materials. At Chevington (Northumberland), paternosters were interred in three purpose-dug pits in the nave and chancel. Remarkable in this case is that the beads were made of trimmed fish vertebrae, which were perforated and strung on a cord (Stallibrass 2007). Finally, at Glasgow Cathedral, two bronze mortars and an iron pestle were buried in the north-west corner of the Lady Chapel crypt, just east of the shrine of St Mungo, below the cathedral choir (Driscoll 2002). The mortars were dated respectively to the late thirteenth century and to the late fourteenth century, while the pestle was later, dated to the sixteenth century. The mortars were placed on their sides in a pit, which appears to have been dug and filled in a single event, suggesting that it was excavated specifically for the mortars. The mortars were well worn and several hundred years old when they were buried.

Conclusions – prayer, protection, magic or memory?

The motivations that stirred medieval people to deposit objects were not documented, but we can reconstruct the broad framework of belief based on our understanding of Christian liturgy, cosmology and life course rituals. Placed deposits were connected in some cases with the use-life of a particular church. At Raunds the pottery vessel was linked with the consecration in the ninth century, while the foundation of the chancel in the tenth century was marked by the Roman coins and prehistoric lithics. The bronze mortars from Glasgow perhaps indicate a case of ritual concealment at the Reformation, located in the most sacred space of the cathedral, near St Mungo's shrine.

Several of the objects were of considerable age at the time of burial: the prehistoric lithics and Roman coins at Raunds, the stone crosses at Barhobble, the heirloom spoons at Iona and the mortars at Glasgow. The contexts of some deposits suggest a more apotropaic purpose, linked with the life course of an individual person or community. The objects from Iona resonate with Christian life course rituals: the headdress fillets are the type worn by brides; spoons were given as marriage and baptism gifts; and the gold ring may be a wedding band (Gilchrist 2012). Burial completed the ritual act and served two additional purposes: it removed the object from circulation and reincorporated it within the community.

The deposits were placed at key liturgical or sacred spaces, for example the altar, chancel arch and clergy bench at Raunds, the altar and rood screen at Barhobble, and the chancel arch and rood screen at Iona and Chevington. The rood screen marked the boundary between the nave and the chancel, a highly significant threshold in cosmological, social and legal respects. The nave was the space owned and used by the congregation; it was accessible to all and its building and upkeep were funded by the parish. Symbolically, the nave represented the space and time of human life on earth (Andrén 1999). The chancel was reserved for the clergy and the sacraments; it was often protected by a locked screen and the laity were prohibited from entering. The building and upkeep of the chancel were the responsibility of the church, and symbolically it represented the Kingdom of Heaven and the afterlife. In this cosmological scheme, the chancel arch and rood screen represent the transition from Christian life to afterlife.

It seems very likely that placed deposits in churches were licit acts, fully compatible with Christian beliefs, and often conducted publicly. It is equally plausible that some deposits were made as private acts of commemoration by the laity. But the location of placed deposits in the restricted space of the chancels of churches strongly suggests that the clergy were active agents in this process. Objects were placed in churches for a variety of complex motives, in connection with acts of spiritual protection, memory and ritual disposal. But to medieval people, these material practices may simply have been regarded as prayers.