

A MEDIEVAL SEAL MATRIX FROM BALTONSBOROUGH

The seal was found in Ham Street, just to the north east of the village of Baltonsborough. It was discovered close to the footings of a barn at ST 554 349, during renovation work in October 2005. Unfortunately, after the seal's discovery it was vigorously cleaned by an amateur, which resulted in wear to the matrix. In August 2007 the seal was sold by an on-line auction site, to a private buyer.

Description

The seal is a flattened oval and made of bronze (Fig. 1). Its dimensions are: length 25mm, breadth 20mm and weight 15gms. On the reverse is a hexagonal conical handle ending in a pierced trefoil. Close to the edge on the reverse at a point corresponding to

the top of the image on the obverse are four indents in a diamond formation. Around the edge of the obverse of the seal within pearled borders runs the legend: AVE MARIA GRA PLENA DHS TECV (Hail Mary, Full of Grace the Lord is With Thee). Within the centre of the seal is a crocketed and pinnacled canopy which contains a standing image of the Virgin crowned, supporting the Christ child on her left arm and holding an orb in her right hand. Before the Virgin and to her left is a kneeling figure of a male ecclesiastic, with his hands raised in prayer. Above this figure are traces of a sprig of foliage (Fig. 2).

Discussion

The seal is finely executed, but cleaning has



Fig. 1 The Baltonsborough seal matrix

significantly degraded its surfaces. The fact that the seal is ecclesiastical in nature is demonstrated by its imagery and legend; such a seal would undoubtedly have been carried by a monastic or person in religious orders. A close examination of the kneeling figure confirms this as he is wearing a habit, scapular and a hood, and his hair is tonsured. As an owner's name is absent from the seal and it is a common design, it may have been purchased at a religious centre or shrine as a souvenir, although equally it may have been specially commissioned by a cleric to express his devotion to the Virgin. The diamond formation on the reverse of the seal would allow its owner to position the matrix correctly while making an impression. Present on some other medieval seal dies, this feature would have been incorporated for ease of use and would suggest that the seal was employed to authenticate documents rapidly; indeed, it is possible that it was used as a counter seal for a prominent individual. The seal can be dated to the first half of the 14th century on stylistic criteria and the Lombardic lettering of the legend.

Variations of this design are numerous, but in this context a 14th-century silver seal in the collection of the Glastonbury Antiquarian Society deserves notice. Found in the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey in the 19th century, this Marian seal also features a



Fig. 2 The seal



Fig. 3 Silver seal from Glastonbury Abbey

hexagonal conical handle ending in a pierced trefoil and its matrix depicts a similar image of the Virgin accompanied by a kneeling cleric (Fig. 3); it too was presumably a personal seal used by one of the religious or alternatively it may have been used as a counter seal. Its legend however, is in English:

LEVEDI MERCI GIBON SEYTH (Lady Mercy Gilbert Says). ‘Gibon’ is a diminutive of Gilbert from the pet form ‘Gibb’, unfortunately I have been unable to identify the Gilbert in question. While the two seals are seemingly the products of different craftsmen and were found in different locations, it is worth considering the possibility that both were owned by Glastonbury monastics or clerics associated with the monastery and that they may have been produced in a goldsmith’s workshop attached to the abbey. A miraculous occurrence associated with an image of the Virgin during the abbacy of Adam of Sodbury (1323–34) may have prompted the production of such seals at Glastonbury (Carley 1985, 260–1); alternatively, they may simply reflect a personal wish on the part of the owner to be publicly associated with and actively to promote devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Acknowledgements

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Reference

- Carley, J.P., 1985. *The Chronicle of Glastonbury Abbey: An Edition, Translation and study of John of Glastonbury’s Cronica sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press.

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