

Report on wooden sculpted cadaver in the Church of St. John the Baptist, Keyston

1) The Keyston carved cadaver is, I believe, a unique piece of sculpture of at least national importance. It is of a cleric (evident from the tonsure), commissioned at approximately three-quarters length, who has been eviscerated; i.e.: the belly is missing the intestines meaning the backbone is visible in the cavity. It is the only extant example of a sculpture showing this procedure and the quality of the craftsmanship indicates that the sculptor had seen more than one evisceration and had a very good knowledge of anatomy (far better than would be expected in England during this period). There is theological grounding for the removal of the bowels which may have influenced the cleric when commissioning this very unusual effigy. It is unlikely the effigy would have been commissioned by anyone other than the cleric himself; this is conjecture although my conjecture is based on my in-depth research into the 44 extant carved cadavers in England and Wales.

2) Made of wood and carved from a single trunk, I had the sculpted wood radio-carbon dated to 1400 CE (Suerc with 95.4% accuracy; November 26 2016); however, a further sampling would help confirm the dating. This is important as analysis of the polychrome (paint), conducted by Lucy Wrapson from the Hamilton Kerr Institute (21 June 2021), as part of my research into this sculpture, has found that the sculpture was 'likely carved when green. Initially, I suggested a carving date of anything between 1405-1415 to allow for seasoning of the felled wood with the heart wood removed to speed up the seasoning process; a hole runs right through the entire sculpture and the sculpture has been hollowed out. Wrapson notes that this hollowing would reduce the overall weight of the memorial, with the hole that runs the entire length of the memorial, remnants of the system used to hold the wood in place whilst it was being carved. David Lepine, an expert on monumental brasses, believes the sculpture to be of Rev William Stewkley/Styvcle whose will he has examined, was sealed on 7 April 1407 and he died the following month. In it he asked to be buried at Stewkley, near Huntington. The date of death (1407) complicates the 1400 CE radio-carbon dating given there is evidence of it being carved when green. Further sampling is therefore imperative although it is very possible, Stewkley had his effigy carved prior to his death – many clerics with carved cadavers did commission their memorial prior to the earthly demise.

3) The polychrome analysis provides some interesting information on what the original sculpture would have looked like. It seems the plinth section was painted red as an underlayer, with traces of black to possibly mimic stone or wood. The shroud (winding cloth) was painted white, and the flesh painted pink. Under the flesh and white shroud is a layer of off-white consisting of lead white, bone white and char black. That there is no evidence of ground (priming layer between the wood and the polychrome) suggests that the effigy is 'the sole remaining element of that was once a painted tomb, the major part of which was

painted on stone' (which required no ground). 'All the pigments are traditional' and consistent with pre machine-grinding (this commences in the nineteenth century). The palette is limited and 'the painter has used the types of pigments more typically associated with larger-scale wall painting than with smaller scale panel painting'. From the analysis of the polychrome it is evident that the eviscerated effigy was part of a larger memorial with the cut-out sections on the plinth most likely part of the original design. It is unclear where this memorial would have been located as there were two chantry chapels originally located in the church. However, given the elaborate carvings on the roof of the chantry chapel on the south side of the church, I would suggest that was the location.

4) The sculpture is damaged and there is a lot of woodworm evidence although this appears not to be recent woodworm as over my time researching the sculpture, this evidence has not got any worse. There is however, recent evidence of some pencil graffiti on the left side of the neck. It is tricky to see as it is very faint. So far there appears to be little evidence of damage from bats although this is largely due to it being covered to protect it from their urine and excrement. Some sculptural damage is deliberate; there are clear cut marks to the right upper arm and lower arm suggestive of a sword or axe. This may date to the Civil War era. Both thumbs are missing and there is other finger damage. This could be wear and tear over the centuries or some element of deliberate damage. The left side of the carved shroud and the left foot are missing and with it the foot end of the burial shroud tie; it is highly unlikely the bottom of the shroud would not mirror the top. The face is worn almost flat, mostly likely through touching – several areas are worn in a way that would suggest touch. The left ear is missing and along with it the left side of the carved burial shroud. However, no cadaver sculpture in England is not without damage and being wooden and isolated, this piece of work is more susceptible than one carved of stone or within a frame of some sort (the frame around cadavers vary and can include chantry chapels).

5) The current location of the sculpture is on the north side of the west wall and it is noticeably quite damp in this area. No one knows how long he has been located in this part of the church but the quite old little notice suggesting a local roof repaired sculpted the cadaver suggests it is getting on for 100 years or so. The position may have exacerbated some of the damage; notably, when the wood was radio-carbon dated no species could be ascertained as the wood was so degraded, but the polychrome analysis showed the wood was knotted, wide-grained, and likely one half of a local-origin oak.

6) It is my suggestion that the sculpture be moved to the chancel area, preferably near the altar as this area is less damp than its current location and there is less evidence of bat activity; bat guano could potentially do a lot of damage to this unique sculpture. It also, in my opinion, requires a perspex cover. This would protect the sculpture from any human damage such as the graffiti, but also from bat damage. In

its new location the sculpture would be far more visible and it would be worth investing in a better resting spot – the current 1936 coffin rest is woodworm ridden and not very attractive, plus it is a little shorter than the sculpture. I would suggest a dining room table or similar would do the job.

Given the uniqueness of the sculpture not just in terms of the sculpture itself but in regard to the history of anatomical knowledge in England, I believe that a Perspex cover is vital in terms of preservation as is his relation to a drier part of the church.

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