RCL17r03 A thirteenth-century altar slab fragment at Rochester Cathedral

Part 1: report text

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Abstract:
A previously unrecorded fragment of a 13th-century altar slab, two-thirds of full-length, identified within a garden feature at King’s Orchard, Rochester is described here, alongside a photographic record and a Structure from Motion 3D model of this fragment in its unaltered position.

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A thirteenth-century altar slab fragment from Rochester Cathedral

A previously unrecorded fragment of a thirteenth-century altar slab, two-thirds of full-length, identified within a garden feature at King’s Orchard, Rochester is described here, alongside a photographic record and a structure from motion 3D model of this fragment in its unaltered position, available at: skfb.ly/6qGAV

In the autumn of 2016 the cathedral gardener Scott Norwood Witts sat for lunch on a stone bench in the corner of King’s Orchard, noticing three incised consecration crosses on the top of the large stone ‘seat’ of the bench and subsequently identifying this was in fact a two thirds of full length fragment of an altar slab. The slab now measures 561mm in width, 1140mm in length and 84mm thick. From the placement of the centre cross 891mm from the surviving edge its original length would have been 1782mm. The three remaining consecration crosses all measure 52mm in diameter. It is composed of a marble, possibly Purbeck based on the small inclusions ranging from 1 to 10mm in length. The estimated date of origin for this altar is the 13th century, based on the style of the consecration crosses and material.

One edge features a cyma-recta moulding, which we will presume to be front facing, the other surviving edges are dressed but plain. There are two 15mm diameter 25mm deep holes on the underside of the remaining corners for fixing the slab to its supporting frame, likely of wood. The back hole is 29mm distant from the back edge and 9mm from the side, the front hole is 12mm from the side edge and 60mm from where the front edge would have extended before breakage.

A corroded but in-situ iron brace of 355mm length by 26mm width has been used as a repair along the broken edge, held in place with molten lead, perhaps following a natural fault in the stone bed. The front left corner has broken away, as has a small section midway along the back edge, with a crack running from this break two-thirds the width of the slab. The fragment now sits atop four carved blocks of unknown origin, themselves atop a rough flagstone pavement, both built seemingly in respect of the current length of the slab, suggesting the break occurred before its being moved to the current position.

It seems reasonable to assume based on such an early date stylistically that this altar did originate from the Cathedral rather than from another church within Rochester. Records of only two churches from this area survive; St. Margaret’s to the south of the city walls and St. Clements near the bridge to the west, of which little is known of the latter. A small chapel was also present, and survives, at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital further to the east of the city. All of which are of a significant distance from the current position of the fragment to perhaps suggest that the cathedral was its origin.

There were at least fifteen altars recorded at Rochester Cathedral in the 13th century (Hope 1898), the quire of which was expanded into its present form from 1170-1220. Those known are the altar of St. James in south nave aisle, the altar of St Nicholas in the centre nave aisle, the Jesus altar and altar of St. Ursula in the north transept, altar of our lady in the south nave transept, a small altar attached to the shrine of St William, one or two in the north quire transept in the chapel of St John the Baptist, an altar to St Peter in the south quire transept, a quire altar in the centre of the crossing and the high altar in the sanctuary. It needs emphasising that these are only altars of which we have written records and that many more may have come and gone during the medieval and post-medieval eras. The most major
A C13th altar slab fragment at Rochester Cathedral

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rebuilding program in the cathedral however; that of the quire and entire east end, may suggest a likely time when new altars were produced or purchased.

It may also be worth entertaining the idea that this slab originated from the altar which would have sat in closest proximity to this area; the infirmary chapel, the location of which was tentatively identified by excavations and radar survey in 2010 (Keevill 2012).

The authors request any persons who recollects the placement of this fragment in its current position or with any other information on its history or its location within King’s Orchard to please get in touch with the Rochester Cathedral Research Guild.

Bibliography
