RCL17r05 Structure from motion models of two carved stone fragments from Anglo-Saxon Rochester

Part 1: report text

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Abstract:
Two carved stone fragments within the lapidarium collection of Rochester Cathedral are described, identified in the 1980s and dated to the 11th century CE. Scale photographs and a Structure from Motion models are provided alongside an interpretation as to their original form and function.

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Structure from motion models of two carved stone fragments from Anglo-Saxon Rochester

Two carved stone fragments within the Lapidarium collection of Rochester Cathedral are described, one recovered during works to underpin the west front in 1889 dated to c.800 CE, the second identified in the 1980s and dated to the first half of the eleventh century. Scale photographs and structure from motion models are provided alongside an interpretation as to their original form and function. Models available at https://skfb.ly/NIDQ and https://skfb.ly/NiCZ.

Only two fragments of carved stone of the many which reside within the Lapidarium collection at Rochester Cathedral have been identified as originating from Anglo-Saxon Rochester.

The first fragment, of a limestone slab, was discovered during work to underpin the west front in 1888-1889, when the foundations of the Saxon cathedral were first revealed (Livett, G. M. 1889). Swanton (1973: p.201) provides a detailed assessment of the fragment:

‘The back is only rough-hewn. The slab is broken on three sides, with only one straight edge remaining. It has all the appearance of a piece of architectural sculpture rather than the fragment of a cross shaft. The ‘exterior’ face is carved in shallow relief, the deepest part (below the belly of the beast) no more than 1/3 in. [8.5mm] deep. The ornament was set out in rectangular panels within an outer border marked off by no more than a lightly-incised line. Parts of two-panels survive: the right-hand containing the remains of a rough plait or interlace, and the left-hand the narrow hind-quarters of an elegant, stylized beast, its tail twisted over the back and round the belly. Although now in so sad a condition, the design seems to have been competently handled. But it’s style and relationships are difficult to assess.’

Swanton’s full article has been published and a link is provided in the bibliography section. Covert (1988) notes that Livett excavated two fragments of Anglo-Saxon stones although the other, smaller fragment, carved with a strap design and showing traces of red and brown colouring, had been lost by that time. In 1976-77, during the excavations at the Prior’s Gate House, another small fragment of Anglo-Saxon sculpture was uncovered and was published in Archæologia Cantiana by Dr. M. J. Swanton entitled: None local stone of these finds were carved in but were of limestone from the Jurassic Ridge perhaps in the Barnack, Northants region.

The second surviving fragment, which has come to be known as the Ringerike fragment, was described by Mary Covert (1988), the discoverer of the piece embedded in wall of the southwest tower:
‘probably Wealden sandstone from the Hastings Beds.(4) By the character of the motifs and carving, it can be identified as being from the Ringerike period of Viking art; in England, roughly the first half of the eleventh century. The stone is approximately the shape and size indicated in Figure A. The curved edge bears part of an inscription in Latin. (See back cover). The relatively straight edges were either cut or broken when the original object was reduced to building rubble. Although there is some damage to the three finished surfaces, the carving of both the designs and the inscription are in excellent condition and show little evidence of wear. Remains of colours, white, crimson, and very little bright orange can be found on the side and back. The exposed face is covered by a pollution layer but where this has been scratched some colour is visible. The front and back are carved in shallow relief. The design of the back is geometric, very simple in character, but the front is filled with motifs typical of the Ringerike period.

Three major motifs characterize the work of the Ringerike period: elongated tendrils, sometimes with buds, derived from Winchester acanthus motifs; representations of the 'Great Beast' or lion; and the 'Serpent', the latter two often in combat. The sculpture field is often crowded as is the front of the Rochester fragment, and the carving is taut and the outlines lively. On the Rochester piece the tendrils and buds are obvious, but it is not entirely clear what the quarter-round motif on its lower left might have been. The Latin inscription is unusual on a piece from this period.’

7 Bibliography


Harrison and Williams (1979) Excavations at Prior’s Gate House.


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