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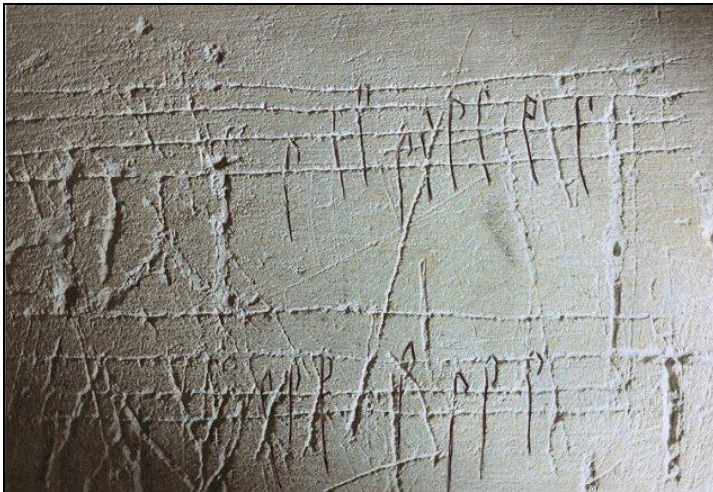
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DISCOVERIES

Curses, Musical Scores and Jonah: Archaeologists' Fascinating Quest to Decipher Medieval Graffiti Scrawled on Walls of Norwich Cathedral

The daily lives of medieval townsfolk have been brought to light by an extraordinary haul of graffiti found in Norwich Cathedral. Messages have been scratched into the walls of the historic buildings over hundreds of years, but few people have ever stopped to work out what they say. Archaeologists have now started a major project to decipher the messages, and have found a mixture of musical pieces, pious exhortations, and even supernatural curses. While most church-goers these days would never even contemplate defacing the walls of a Norman cathedral with graffiti, medieval residents of Norfolk had a far less protective attitude to their monuments. Volunteers from the Norfolk Medieval Graffiti Survey began cataloguing the scrawls found in the cathedral earlier this year, and have already recorded hundreds of inscriptions.

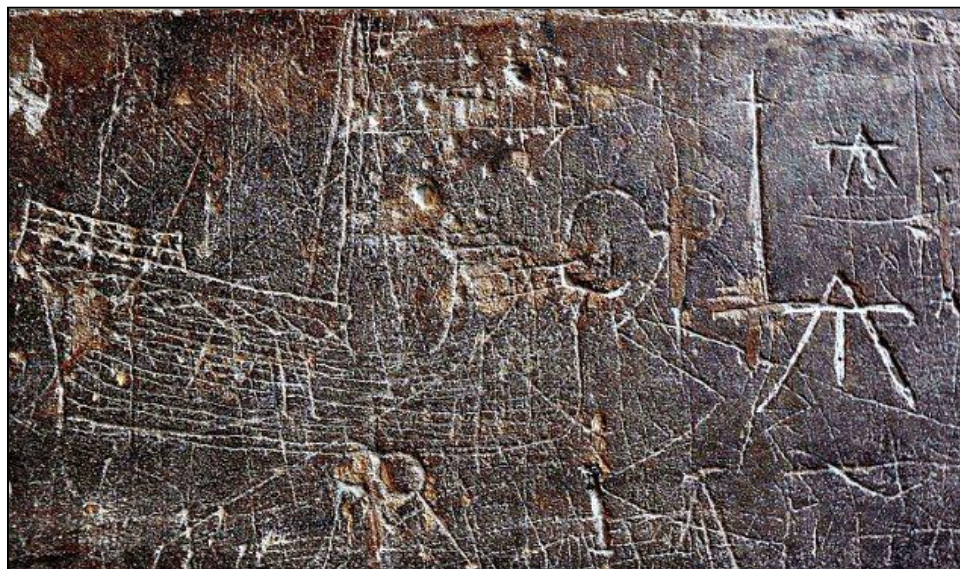


Music: These lines of notes (which have been digitally overlaid for the sake of clarity) were scratched into the walls of Norwich Cathedral in the medieval period

“The walls are covered in everything you can think of,” project director Matthew Champion said. “Medieval ships, names, animals, windmills, figures and prayers. Just about everything that would have been important to the citizens of Norwich during the Middle Ages.” “I think we have to understand that our modern view of the cathedral is very different from the way in which it was viewed by the local people during the Middle Ages, particularly the ways in which it was used. They saw nothing wrong with carving their prayers into the very stones of the building.” His deputy Colin Howey added: “These are whispers in stone and you are standing in

the place where, hundreds of years ago, someone would have been scratching away. It could be a devout symbol of faith, or someone creating a slander, or a musician noting down a new composition. There are a whole range of motivations - and exactly what they could have been, who knows? But it is tantalizing.”

Ship: This inscription shows a boat about to be swallowed by a giant whale, seen in the bottom right



In the cathedral's nave, a clear outline of a ship had been recorded earlier - possibly a prayer left for a fisherman or mariner. But until last week, no one had spotted that the ship was being pursued by an enormous open-mouthed whale. “We think it could have been a prayer made by someone related to a sailor, and the whale is most likely Jonah's whale,” Howey said.

On another pillar are two four-line musical staves, overlaid with a series of notes, thought to have been inscribed in the second half of the 16th century, before the introduction of the five-line staves used today. “We are talking to the cathedral organist and he is having a look to see if he could play it,” Mr Howey said. “Here we have a piece of music from 400 years ago being lifted off the walls - indeed it could have been the organist at the time who scratched this composition onto a wall in order to play it later.”



A more sinister group of inscriptions consist of beautifully carved text which was written upside down, suggesting they may have had a magical import such as being used as curses. “We know that from ancient times through to the medieval, inverting things was to wish bad upon them,” Howey said. “The graffiti was presumably intended to smooth a worshipper's path to Heaven - and could even have been scratched into the wall by a Roman Catholic secretly expressing his forbidden beliefs. Petal-shaped designs seem to have been carved deep into the

stone by masons working on the construction of the building, and have been described as “devotional gestures” or symbols to “ward off bad spirits.” The graffiti initiative, which has gained the approval of the cathedral's Dean and Chapter, will continue throughout the spring and early summer.

Rewritten from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2274401/Archaeologists-fascinating-quest-decipher-medieval-graffiti-scrawled-cathedral-walls.html#ixzz2PQ6BifU1>