
Volume 2 | Issue 1

2005

WERE FOSSIL SCALLOP SHELLS EXPLOITED DURING THE MIDDLE AGES?

Mark A. Hall
Perth Museum & Art Gallery

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation

Hall, Mark A.. "WERE FOSSIL SCALLOP SHELLS EXPLOITED DURING THE MIDDLE AGES?." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 2, 1 (2005). <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol2/iss1/8>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.



WERE FOSSIL SCALLOP SHELLS EXPLOITED DURING THE MIDDLE AGES?

By Mark A. Hall, Perth Museum & Art Gallery

Helping a colleague recently to prepare a fossils exhibition I was surprised to find a fossil pecten or scallop shell (see accompanying illustration). This particular example comes from Suffolk, East Anglia (where it occurs in some abundance). To a non-geologist it is remarkable in not being rock-bound, but to all intents and purposes like a “fresh” (the geological term is *living*) scallop. Such relatively recent fossils weather quite readily out of their *Pleistocene* (i.e. Ice Age) geology and in Britain they are particularly common in East Anglia (Anderton *et al* 1979, 257-59; for Pectenidae in general, including the St. James’s scallop sub-species, see Tebble 1976, 55-69 and Murray 1985, 89-90). Fossil scallops have along geological history from the Triassic onwards, though typically it is only in Tertiary deposits that you get loose sediments and loose shells.



Fossil Pecten from Suffolk, England. The colouration is staining from the geological deposit.

© Perth Museum & Art Gallery

It struck me that such readily accessible scallop-shell fossil beds could well have been a source for pilgrim shells during the medieval period. We know that in the past a range of fossils were found and interpreted, both during antiquity (e.g. see Mayor 2000) and medieval times, including belemnites (variously known as thunderbolts, Devil's fingers and St. Peter's fingers), gryphea (known as the Devil's toenail) and crinoid stems (known as St. Cuthbert's beads) (see Bassett 1982). It struck me as being not implausible that where fossil pecten were readily accessible that they could be exploited as pilgrimage souvenirs (legitimately or otherwise). As long ago as 1970 it was proven that the amino acid content of Pecten shells declines progressively with the age of the fossil (Akiyama and Wyckoff 1970, 1097). It may be a useful field of enquiry to see if there is a correlation between known pilgrimage souvenirs and their geology – can pilgrim scallops be identified as of fossil origin and if so can they be traced to their geological deposits?

Bibliography

Akiyama, M. and Wyckoff, R. W. G. 1970 'The Total Amino Acid Content of Fossil Pecten Shells', in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 67.3, 1007-1100.

Anderton, R., Bridges, P. H., Leeder, M. R. and Saltwood, B. W. 1979 *A Dynamic Stratigraphy of the British Isles - A Study in Crustal Evolution*, London.

Bassett, M. G. 1982 '*Formed Stones*', *Folklore and Fossils*, Cardiff.

Mayor, A. 2000 *The First Fossil Hunters – Paleontology in Greek and Roman Times*, Princeton.

Murray, J. W. (ed.) 1985 *Atlas of Invertebrate Macrofossils*, London.

Tebble, N. 1976 (2nd ed.) *British Bivalve Seashells*, London.

Mark A Hall,
History Officer,
Perth Museum & Art Gallery,
Perth & Kinross,
Scotland.
Email: mahall@pkc.gov.uk