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### Book Review: Matthew Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches*

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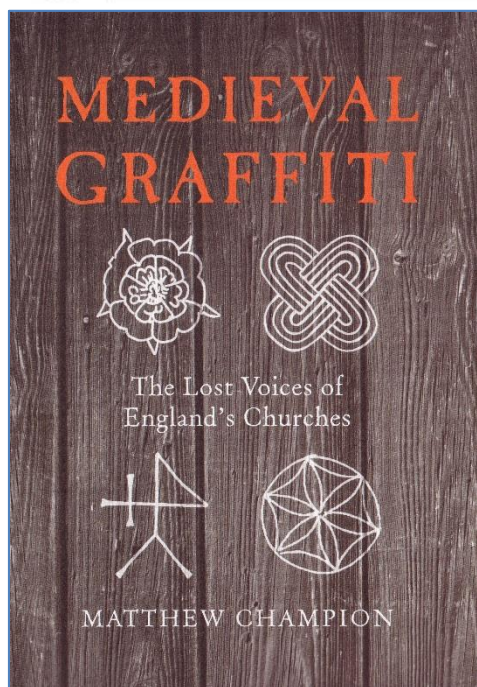
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***Book Review: Matthew Champion, Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches (London, Ebury Press), 2015, 253 pages.***

By William Anderson, University of Melbourne

As an undergraduate student in Norwich, I spent many days exploring the city's medieval fabric – roaming its sinuous streets and alleys, seeking out its flint-encrusted churches, and searching its hidden and obscure corners. I went on missions to find the chapel of St William on Mousehold Heath; to gain admittance to Jurnet's House, the twelfth-century Jews' house on King Street; and to access as much of Norwich Cathedral and its close as I could. Walking up from the railway station, I always took a detour along the River Wensum, passing Pulls Ferry, where there are remnants of a canal dug to transport stone shipped from France right up to the building site of the cathedral. The feat of bringing vast quantities of stone such a distance at the end of the eleventh century amazed me.

The imported Caen limestone was used to clad the cathedral's flint and mortar core and to form its innovative architectural features. Inside, the cream-coloured stone is worked into a stunning arrangement of columns, capitals and arches. But the fine-grained masonry was not only a medium for master craftsmen commissioned by Norman bigwigs: it was a canvas for generations of townspeople who engraved letters, symbols and illustrations into its surface. On the piers and panels of the crossing, nave and ambulatory are hundreds of

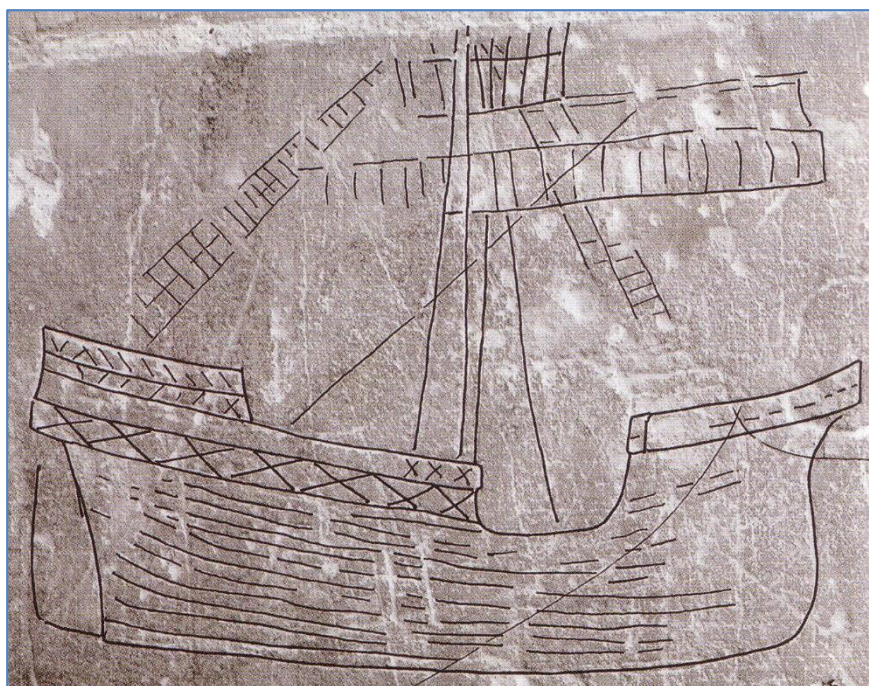
markings – shallow scrawls and scratchings, accurately rendered geometric patterns and accomplished representations of ships, animals and human figures



**Figure 1** Heavily inscribed wall, Norwich Cathedral. Photo: William Anderson.

Matthew Champion, in his book on medieval graffiti, is unapologetic for privileging East Anglia as a primary source of evidence. He reports that over 5,000 separate markings have been recorded in Norwich Cathedral alone. Suffolk and Norfolk were among the most populous regions of medieval England; they have a high concentration of parish churches and a corresponding proliferation of graffiti. Within the counties there are trends peculiar to specific localities, for example, the maritime subjects in the parish churches of Glaven port on the north Norfolk coast. Incised into the red-coated piers of St Nicholas church at Blakeney “dozens of examples of ship graffiti ... would have looked like a small white fleet sailing across a deep red-ochre sea.”





**Figure 2** Late-medieval ship graffiti, Norwich Cathedral. Photo: Matthew Champion.

Despite the East Anglian slant, Champion draws on examples from churches throughout England. This synthesis of evidence collected from hundreds of sites and incorporating the results of recent surveys is among the first of its kind, most previous scholarship being confined to individual churches or localities. Chronologically, the book's scope deals mainly with the high and later medieval periods, though continues beyond the Reformation of the mid-sixteenth century. Certain ritual signs of the medieval period persisted even into the nineteenth century, although the Reformation did bring about substantial changes in the content of graffiti, which "becomes more territorial and memorial in nature."

The term "graffiti" is here used in a very broad sense, denoting a variety of markings with an even greater range of functions and meanings. Despite superficial similarities, medieval graffiti is not analogous to modern-day "tagging." Unlike today's criminalized "graffers," those carving marks into medieval churches were not regarded as vandals. Church authorities seem to have tolerated the practice, clerics themselves left markings, and graffiti tended to be retained rather than erased. Moreover, the line between the rituals that were

acceptable and unacceptable to the Church was hazy: the beliefs expressed in some graffiti appear far removed from orthodox Christianity. So inscribing the walls of churches was a distinctive phenomenon that relates to the world-views of medieval people. That is not to discount universal aspects of marking symbols and images into stone. Seen from a global perspective, medieval graffiti might even be conceived as “rock art” (indeed, designs such as circles, swastikas and hand outlines appear in many unrelated cultural contexts). Yet, with the wealth of supporting evidence – textual, architectural, pictorial and artefactual – these markings can be situated specifically in the realm of English medieval beliefs, customs and society.

Geometric symbols identified as apotropaic, also known as ritual protection marks or “witch marks,” are among the most ubiquitous. Of these, compass-drawn, circular designs – the daisy wheel and hexfoil – are especially common. Their protective force works on the principle that evil spirits would be trapped within the shape’s “endless line.” The pentangle, a five-pointed star, is another motif that offered protection against evil spirits. Unusually, this symbol’s meaning is historically attested – in a digressive passage in the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. But other symbols remain enigmatic and their meaning was probably mutable in different historical and geographical settings. Especially prevalent is the “VV” motif, of which there are multitudes in Norfolk churches. Its connection with the Virgin Mary has been posited, but the sign’s continued use in post-medieval times and in situations with no apparent relationship to Marian worship, make this one possibility among many.

Through telling and re-telling, myths and misconceptions have grown around certain motifs and their meanings. In seeking more rigorous explanation, Champion critiques a number of enduring tales, for example that compass-drawn designs were made by master masons or that these designs represent the sites of consecration crosses. It is not that these

explanations might be true in some cases, but that they are essentialist and so overshadow more-complex or multifaceted interpretation. Dismissing the notion that carved crosses were the work of pilgrims, Champion takes aim at the “ancient vicars and antiquarians [who] had simply found a story that explained the existence of the graffiti, put it forward as one possible interpretation, and, with no other obvious or documented answer coming forth, it has become regarded as fact as the decades and centuries have passed.” The same might be said for many customary explanations in archaeology, and it is refreshing to see these being deconstructed in an intelligent and undogmatic manner.

How, then, can we explain this mark-making habit? Some carvings have a relatively clear, functional purpose, for example, masons’ marks and architectural designs. Less obvious are the numerous repeated symbols which we may regard as “ritual.” But modern distinctions between the symbolic and the practical simply did not exist in the medieval mind. The potential power of a mark inscribed in a consecrated church was very real. Nevertheless, it remains possible to attribute protective, commemorative and even vengeful meanings to certain graffiti. In this sense, the markings materialize people’s beliefs, literally setting in stone their aspirations, anxieties and prayers which would have been communicated in speech, or would simply be swirling around inside their heads.

Whether the subject matter is identified as ritual, astrological, heraldic or the “professional” marks of masons and merchants, definitive explanation is rarely possible. Even inscriptions with an apparently obvious function raise problems of interpretation. Mass dials, for example, appear in locations and at a frequency that calls into question their use for timekeeping. Usually we can simply offer a number of plausible interpretations, although some are more convincing than others. One of Champion’s central arguments is that by inscribing marks into the fabric of the church their power was enhanced and that the intentions of the marker were made permanent. The specific, architectural context is therefore

essential.

The location of particular signs within churches offers tantalizing clues about their meaning and the intentions and identity of their makers. Hexfoils frequently appear on fonts, both as part of the original decorative scheme and as informal graffiti, and this suggests a connection with baptism. Champion proposes that some of these were made by women, not only because of the association with childbirth and infants, but because the designs would often have been made with shears, a common female accoutrement in the late Middle Ages. But, as always, this is not the only way to explain the design. Hexfoils also occur on parish chests, where the important documents and valuables of the parish were kept under lock and key, and so in these cases they served a different protective purpose. Another spatial trend is the frequency of crosses on doorways and porches. Despite being a seemingly peripheral part of the church, the porch was used for wedding ceremonies and other official occasions, and crosses may have been made to seal these transactions. A more specific example of spatial patterning is the placement of ship graffiti within the church at Blakeney, concentrated on columns near to a shrine of St. Nicholas, so probably associated with this cult.

The success of this book is to connect the particular with the general, linking recurring and individual designs with cultural and political aspects of medieval society. Biographical details emerge from certain examples, especially those that record personal names. We have the fifteenth-century curse directed against the Keynford family of



**Figure 3** Compass-drawn Hexfoil or “daisy wheel,” All Saint’s church, Barnardiston, Suffolk. Photo: Matthew Champion.

merchants, whose name appears in well-cut, but inverted script alongside an unusual astrological symbol in Norwich Cathedral; tragedy is conveyed at the church of Kingston in Cambridgeshire in the inscribed names of three children of the Maddyngley family, who died during an outbreak of the plague in 1515; and political defeat is made tangible in the names left by Leveller mutineers imprisoned by Oliver Cromwell in Burford church in Oxfordshire, one inscription reading “Anthony Sedley – 1649 – prisner,” being singled out as “almost tangibly bitter.” This is graffiti as historical record, but equally as instinctive human expression, especially at moments of heightened emotional and political intensity.

Arranged into chapters that address different categories of subject matter and illustrated with color plates and line drawings, Champion’s book is both a coherent text and a useful point of reference. The lack of notes and bibliographic references may frustrate purists, and it does hinder the reader from following up the research, debates and examples discussed. However, it also prevents the text from becoming clogged up with numbers and potentially distracting asides. Another criticism is that there is little quantified analysis so that the incidence of particular subjects is described as “frequent” or “rare,” or found in one region more than others, but without the numbers to back up these statements. But these criticisms are far outweighed by the book’s erudition and accessibility. While rigorous in its scholarship – packed full of information and insights which have come from research pursued over many years and collected by a dedicated team of surveyors – it is eminently readable. Champion’s achievement is to bring a vast body of obscure evidence out from the shadowy interiors of England’s churches and to show its importance in understanding the lives and beliefs of medieval people. 🐼