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Book Review: The Monuments Man: Essays in Honour of Jerome Bertram edited by Christian Steer

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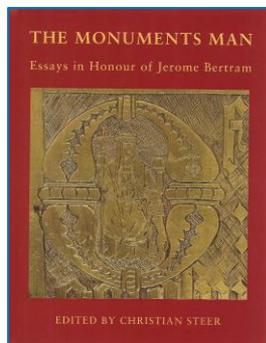
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Review *The Monuments Man: Essays in Honour of Jerome Bertram*, edited by Christian Steer (Donington, Lincolnshire, Shaun Tyas, 2020), 564 pp., (hardback); ISBN 978-1-907730-84-9

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Within the corpus of academic art historical writing it is relatively rare to come across a publication that feels at once both intellectually relevant, but also enjoyably indulgent; all the more so when the book in question is dedicated to the subject of funerary sculpture. Yet *Monuments Man*, published at the beginning of this year by Shaun Tyas in conjunction with the Monumental Brass Society (founded in Cambridge, England in 1887), is just such a work. Beautifully illustrated with high-quality colour photographs, the book was originally intended as a *Festschrift* to celebrate the seventieth birthday of Father Jerome Bertram, a catholic priest of the Oxford Oratory and senior Vice President of the Monumental Brass Society. A member of the society from the age of eleven, Father Bertram was a prolific scholar who dedicated his life both to the Church and the study of all forms of sepulchral monuments, publishing nearly one hundred books and articles on the subject in his own name alone. Although he became involved in the final stages of *Monuments Man*, Father Bertram sadly died before it was completed and so the twenty-four essays that make up the book have become a memorial in their own right to the life of a man regarded as a modern pioneer of church monument research and, moreover, a celebration of the many years of advice, encouragement and friendship that he gave the tomb scholars' community. (Fig. 1)

Monuments Man brings together new work by twenty-six eminent art historians, historians and archaeologists whose diversity of disciplinary approaches, subjects of research and geographical spread reflect the equally broad spectrum of Father Bertram's scholastic interests. The essays are organised in chapters according, broadly, to time period and location of study, and range in date from an archaeological assessment of the first century AD *Totenmahl* tombstones of Roman Britain by Martin Henig (Chapter 3) (Fig. 2) through to Robin Emmerson's persuasive proposal, based on contemporary documents, that Josiah Wedgwood produced a (now lost) jasperware monument to commemorate his business partner Thomas Bentley in 1782 (Chapter 20). Despite such a variation of contextual themes,



Figure 1 Jerome Bertram working on his rubbing of the brass of bishop John Waltham of Salisbury (d. 1395), Confessor's Chapel, Westminster Abbey, taken in the summer of 2019. Photo: © Alexander Master.

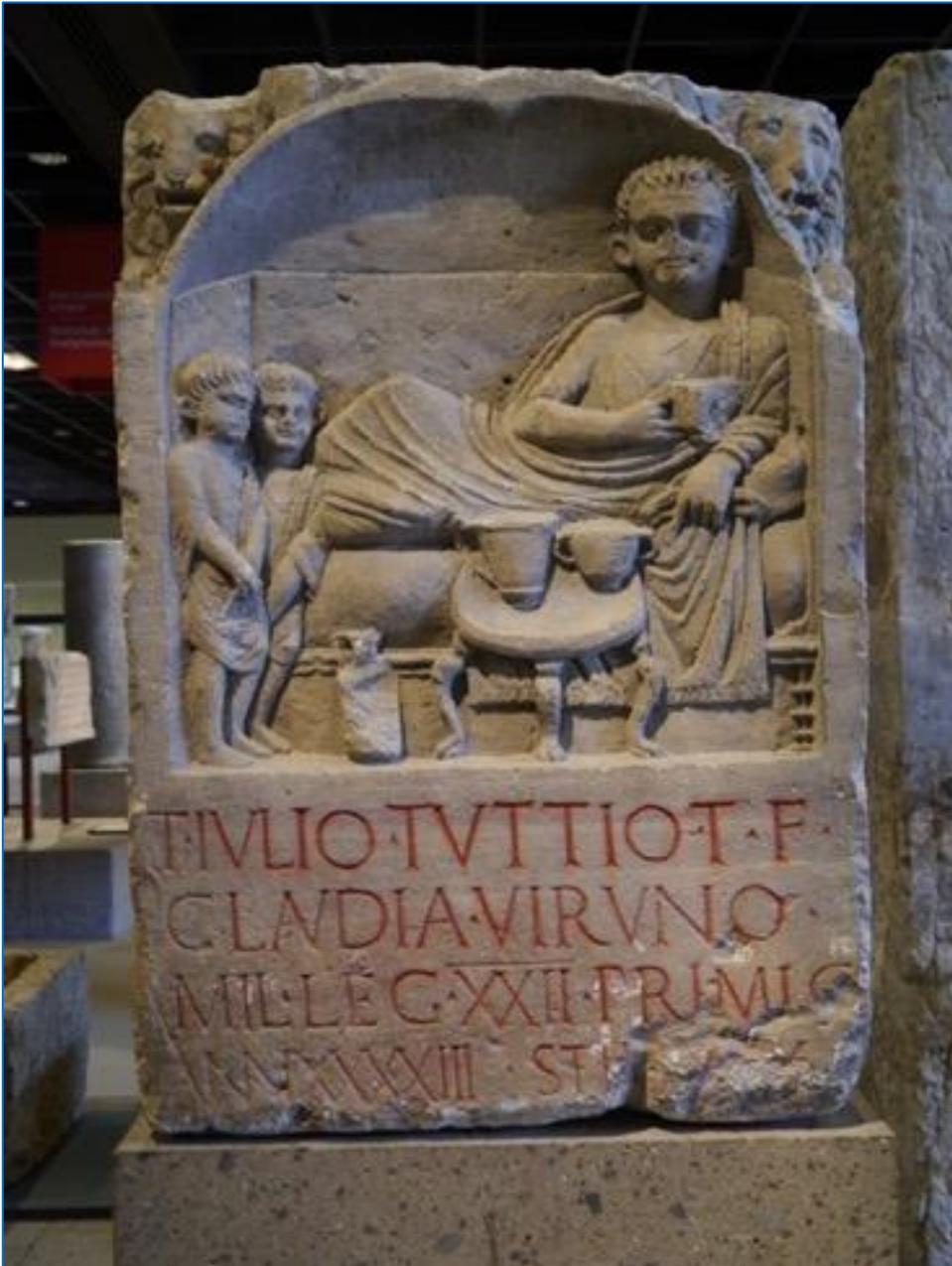


Figure 2 Tombstone of the veteran M. Valerius Celerianus, limestone, from Cologne. Photo: © Penny Coombe.

the essays sit comfortably together within the book due not just to the elegant editing of Christian Steer, Honorary Visiting Fellow in the Department of History at the University of York, but equally to the comprehensive nature of their academic methodologies. Over and above the temporal or locational specificities of each chapter (which likewise vary from national scale surveys down to individual artefacts), almost every author takes an impressively holistic approach to their work. The more traditional focus areas of sepulchral study, such as iconography and inscription, are of course covered, but similar consideration is also given to the wider social, religious, and material contexts of each tomb's commissioning, production, reception, and contemporary function and meaning, such as in Sally Badham's "The Iconography and Meaning of Semi-Effigial and Related Monuments in Lincolnshire, c. 1275 – c.1400" (Chapter 7). **(Fig. 3)** A useful reminder to the wider scholastic



Figure 3
Semi-effigial
monument to John
de Glori at
Blankney,
Lincolnshire.
Photo: © Tim
Sutton

community, perhaps, that the relevance of tombs as material artefacts goes well beyond the traditional antiquarian emphasis on epigraph and effigy.

Nigel Saul's fascinating chapter on the dearth of pre-Reformation monuments in the county of Cornwall is an excellent case in point, for its conclusions are drawn as much from the peculiarities of medieval Cornish commemoration relative to the country as a whole as it is from the tombs themselves (Chapter 8). For a large county (at least by English standards), made rich from its mining of tin, Saul questions the striking scarcity of monuments (both extant and documented) built from the start of

the thirteenth century through to the 1540s. In contrasting these apparent sculptural lacunae against the wider popularity of the figural tomb in the rest of medieval England he makes the astute observation that it may have been, at least in large part, simply a result of the sheer intractability of the local available stone. The geology of Cornwall is dominated by granite, a coarse-grained igneous rock whose characteristic durability and hardness made it not only difficult to carve, but may well have discouraged stonemasons from ever setting up in the region in material numbers in the first place. This apparent gap in Cornish supply, Saul concludes, may equally explain why the use of the obit roll, in contrast to the rest of the country, was particularly used perhaps as a means to record and commemorate names on paper that would not otherwise be recognised on stone.

The importance of viable stone supplies and associated specialist workshops to the form and geographic spread of medieval monuments is also one addressed by Philip Lankester and John Blair in their interesting chapter on the Purbeck marble industry (Chapter 10). It is long acknowledged in art historical scholarship that Purbeck, a dark limestone capable of achieving a deep shine, was extensively used in high status secular and ecclesiastical tombs in England during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Despite only being quarried in one place, in and around the village of Corfe on the Isle of Purbeck on the south coast, the stone was used for a range of architectural and sepulchral elements as far north as Durham Cathedral (County Durham) and as far east as Norwich (Norfolk). And yet very little is known on the specificities of how the marble was produced – in particular, the extent to which it was carved on site at the churches or shipped as a complete product direct from the Dorset coast. Following years of painstaking study on the Isle of Purbeck, Lankester and Blair bring together a number of examples of finely-detailed finished items (such as sections of colonettes carved with foliate and heraldic devices) that provide the much-needed physical evidence to finally conclude that a significant proportion of the stone was indeed worked on by specialist carvers located around the quarries of Corfe.

John S. Lee's chapter on the lost chantry chapels of St. John the Baptist's Church in Haddlesey, North Yorkshire (Chapter 17) is another fascinating contribution to the book, and in this case a salient reminder of the value of documentary evidence to the historian and the sheer quantity (and quality) of contemporary information they can provide. The four chantry chapels, established in the church in the fourteenth century to commemorate the noble families of Miles Stapleton, John Hathelsay, and William Fitzwilliam, were destroyed like so many others during King Edward VI's 1548 Dissolution of the Chantries. Through a combination of surviving records (principally foundation deeds, wills, and patent rolls), Lee reconstructs what he calls the 'commemorative jigsaw' of the original commissions and argues convincingly for the chapels' likely architectural design and associated fittings. By so doing he graphically resurrects the chantry spaces of the three families, notable not only for the potential sophistication and beauty of their interiors, but also for the important role that they would have played within the

community of Haddlesey for the two-and-a-quarter centuries in which they were engaged in active service.

One final highlight worthy of mention, and perhaps the most unique in the book in terms of subject material, is Julian Luxford's chapter on the depiction and use of the physical dimensions of Christ's tomb in late medieval England (Chapter 2). (Fig. 4) The Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was the most important of all relics to the western Church, representative as it was of the physical state of Christ's shared humanity, and it was copiously re-imagined and re-presented across artistic and architectural mediums of the period. The grand churches built across Europe as

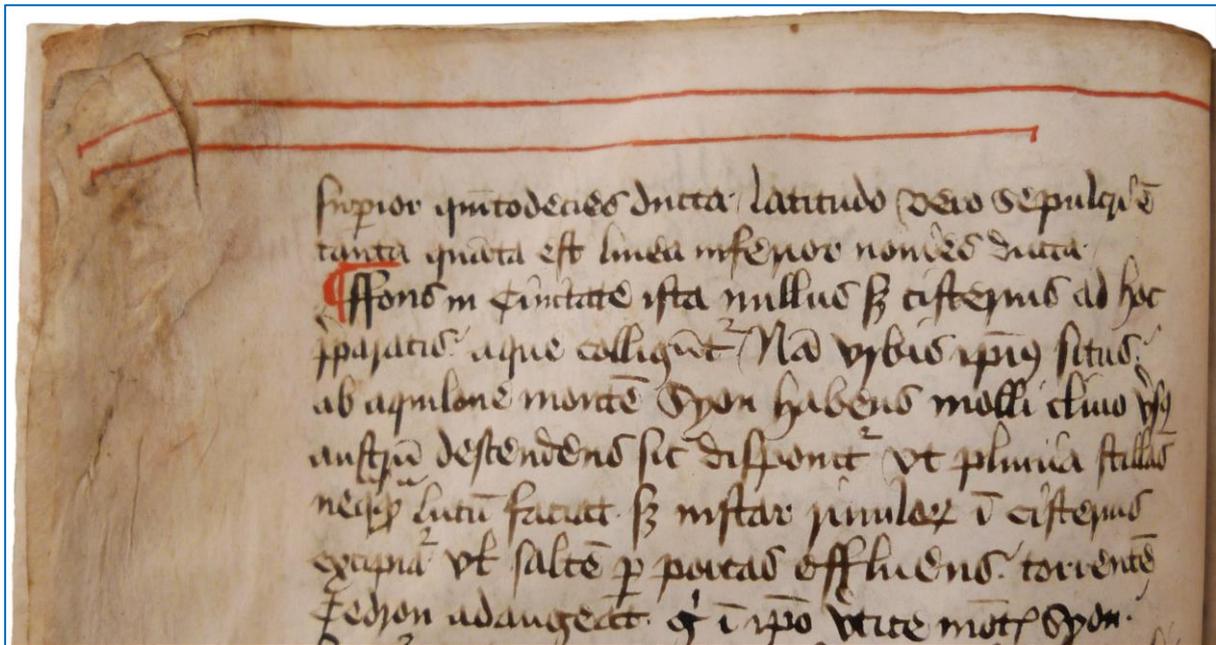


Figure 4 Part of a description of Judea accompanied by lines purporting to give the measurements of Christ's tomb. Probably mid-fifteenth century, San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 19960, f. 8v. Photo: after *The Monuments Man*, p. 16, permission of the Huntington Library.

such structural simulacra have, unsurprisingly, inspired a vast scholarly literature, but at the other end of the symbolic spectrum the small metrical diagrams found in the margins of a collection of English manuscripts from the same period have received no academic attention at all. In the chapter Luxford brings together three examples of these measurements (each drawn as a simple set of parallel lines alongside the main manuscript text) in order, as he puts it, not to reach any new conclusions on medieval representations of the tomb, but to highlight that the relative contemporary importance of such marginal annotations should not be overlooked. The totemic power of the sepulchre to the western religious mind was so profound that even images as graphically simple as the diagrams 'regardless of

their stake in art ... did not have a greater or lesser stake in Christ'. For the art historian in particular the relevance of this statement is twofold: firstly, and as Luxford suggests, because of the potential that the lines may have been used iconographically to encode the measurements of the tomb into paintings and sculptures of the time; and secondly, and most critically, to reaffirm the principle that there should be no material hierarchy in the study of the art and artefacts of the medieval Western church.

The only unconvincing element of the book comes at the very end in Charlotte Stanford's final chapter on the pilgrimage routes of fifteenth century England to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain (Chapter 25). Although a very interesting work of scholarship in its own right, and worthy certainly of publication, it is only the actual destination of the journeys described - the tomb of the apostle James at Santiago - that provides a relatively tenuous scholastic link to the rest of the collected essays. It would have been more appropriate, perhaps, to conclude the book instead on the previous chapter and Richard Busby's brief biography of Alexander Nesbitt (Chapter 24). Nesbitt was a nineteenth century Anglo-Irish antiquarian and, like the titular subject of the book as a whole, a leading pioneer in his time in the study of European brasses and incised slabs. Like Father Bertram, Nesbitt travelled extensively throughout the United Kingdom and continental Europe in the study of funerary monuments and although he published significantly fewer academic papers than his more prolific contemporary counterpart, the two men clearly shared a deep and astute understanding of their chosen field. In celebrating a man such as Nesbitt, whose name has fallen out of contemporary tomb scholarship, Richard Busby – as he says himself – provides a fitting final tribute to Father Jerome Bertram: a scholar, enthusiast and friend whose name will clearly live on in the study and appreciation of church monuments far beyond the pages of this beautiful and fascinating book.

