Medieval and Later Stones Excavated at 51-57 West Street, Berwick-upon-Tweed

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The purpose of this short article is to provide an account of six worked building stones recovered during excavation in Berwick-upon-Tweed in the period from March to June 2016. At least three of the stones come from important medieval buildings, and as such they are of some value for our generally poor grasp of the town's pre-Reformation architecture. It should be noted at the outset, however, that little can be said with certainty about the original provenance or purpose of the stones. A few ideas about their origins are offered at the end of the article, but the stones are published here mainly on the principle that anything which contributes to knowledge of Berwick's early status as a great trading port, dense with buildings that have now completely vanished, deserves to be advertised.

Archaeological context

Commercial redevelopment of an L-shaped site in Bridge Street (nos 64-66) and West Street (nos 51-57), Berwick-upon-Tweed, was the catalyst for the excavations, carried out by CFA Archaeology Ltd. The archaeologists have produced a detailed excavation report, to which this article is inevitably indebted (CFA Archaeology Ltd 2017). The site lies on a north-east axis, extending roughly 26m along West St and about 15m along Bridge Street. At its north-east end, along West Street, the bases of several walls were uncovered and subsequently recorded. The archaeological context on this part of the site is complex, involving up to six phases of activity. Of these, the walls were the earliest, and seem likely on the evidence of their construction, situation and general appearance to date from the 15th or 16th century. They belonged to a rectangular, unicameral building some 8.4 by 5.8m internally and approximately 10m by 7.4m externally. While three of the walls have been extensively robbed, one (at the south-west end) remains intact to a maximum height of six courses (i.e. a

little over 1m). It is built of red sandstone blocks around a rubble core, and is approximately 1.3m thick. The purpose and function of the building are unknown.

Another rubble wall, less solidly constructed but of similar thickness, was inserted across the site towards the north-east end, apparently at a much later date. This later wall cut the lateral walls of the earlier structure, and was built over soil deposits containing fragments of late medieval pottery and coke dumped at some stage in this building. The presence of coke here, a material used in iron production in Scotland from the 17th century, suggests that the wall was built after the 1600s, perhaps in the 18th or 19th century, but its chronology and purpose are very uncertain (CFA Archaeology Ltd 2017, 8, 16). The medieval worked stones (Stones 1-3 below) were found in this wall, used as rubble infill. Because they are not particularly large (and thus no better than any other piece of building rubble), and as no significance can be given to their choice or placement, it is likely that they were obtained somewhere at or near the site of their reuse, close to the northern head of Berwick Bridge. If the wall in which they found was built in the 18th or 19th century, then these stones have probably been reused more than once, on the grounds that they are unlikely to have lain about unused for long periods. The other three stones were found in loose deposits elsewhere on the site.

The worked stones

All of the stones appear to be carved from the same cream-coloured sandstone. There is no evidence of fire-damage, and no visible paint or lime-wash, on any of them. Sandstone of this sort was available locally, and thus the stones were almost certainly worked somewhere in or near Berwick. Mike Cressey produced a useful description of them for the archaeological report (CFA Archaeology Ltd 2017, 12-13), and I have been able to build on this thanks to Melanie Johnson, who arranged for the stones to be brought to me for study.

Stone 1 (Plate I). A fragment of a tympanum, with plate tracery consisting of a round-headed, roll-moulded arch, part of a second arch, and part of an oculus carved around with pellet decoration. Height c. 0.45m and width c. 0.56m.

This stone, from the head of a small two-light window, is an example of plate tracery. Plate tracery is the earliest type of tracery, used in Scotland from at least the late 12th century until the mid-13th century. The available comparanda are in monastic or important secular churches: Jedburgh (gallery openings in the nave) and Inchcolm (west tower) have similarly basic, if larger, examples of plate tracery. Other surviving examples include Hexham abbey (gallery openings in the choir), Holyrood abbey (west front and gallery openings in the nave) and Glasgow cathedral (gallery openings in the choir). None of these was planned after c. 1240, and all have pointed rather than round arches (Fawcett 1984, 150-1, 161-2; Fawcett 2011, figs 69, 80, 98, 100, 110, 112). Clearly, the use of round arches at Berwick need not suggest a date before the introduction of pointed arches to the region, but it is safe to assign the fragment to the last quarter of the 12th century or the first quarter of the 13th century. A date earlier in this period seems preferable.

A tympanum of the sort represented by the Berwick fragment was simply a thin piece of stone set above a pair of narrow window lights. The heads of the lights were carved into the tympanum, and an ornamental piercing usually added above and between them. Whoever carved the Berwick fragment handled the duct of the arch and the width of the moulding evenly and with confidence (such work was not, in any case, given to novices). The pellets around the oculus, of which three survive from an original six, are a refinement not found in the examples of plate tracery mentioned above. They are a minor example of a pre-Gothic type of ornament, which appears in a more developed form around the north-west doorway of Kelso abbey (mid-12th century) (Fawcett 2011, fig. 34). The fact that each pellet is only c. 20mm across suggests that the window was set low down, where its details could be seen;

although if the pellets were picked out in colour against a lime-washed ground then they would have been visible from a distance. That the tympanum was not set in a tower, at least, is shown by the fact that the lights were glazed. On the interior face of the fragment, the arch-head is rebated to a depth of c. 40mm for a wooden glazing-frame. Taken together, the moulding, pellets and glazing imply that the building for which the tympanum was made was impressively and expensively ornamented.

Stones 2 and 3 (Plates II, III). Two voussoirs, of roughly equal size, from the leading order of an arch. The main feature is a keel-moulded roll flanked by fillets, with a semi-circular hollow on what would have been the outer face when the stone was in situ. Heights c. 0.20-0.23m, depths c. 0.30-0.35m.

The fact that the moulding formations are practically the same suggests that the stones come from the same building and probably the same arch. One of them (Plate II) is straight and thus belonged to a jamb, while the other (Plate III), slightly curved, formed part of an arch proper. The straight stone is damaged on both sides, so that its moulding profile is incomplete. It may be noted that these stones cannot have been made for a Gothic window because they have no rebates for glass, and that they probably do not come from a vault-rib, because the moulding profile differs on either side of the roll. A doorway thus seems the most likely context, for the arch was evidently a monumental one. In theory, a gallery arch is also possible, but there is no evidence for a church large and expensive enough to have incorporated such features in medieval Berwick. The profiles are complex without being either distinctive or closely datable. Moulding formations of this sort were used from the 13th to the 15th centuries. The stones do, however, imply an aesthetically ambitious and thus costly building.

Stones 4 and 5 (Plate IV). Two straight pieces of stone mullion with filleted mouldings and rebates for glazing frames. In section, they are elongated and rounded. They are of roughly equal length (c. 0.50m) and evidently from the same window or suite of windows.

Found in a deposit of made ground next to the largely intact medieval wall. They are likely to date from the 16th or 17th century.

Stone 6 (Plate V). A straight length of stone, chamfered on both sides and broken off crookedly at one end. The outer, tapering surface, covered with tooling marks, looks as if it has been reworked. The width is c. 0.40m, the length c. 0.27m.

Found in a deposit of cobbles on the West Street site. The stone is not closely datable, and cannot be confidently assigned to either the late middle ages or the early modern period.

Inferences arising from Stones 1-3

While no speculation about the provenance of stones 4, 5 and 6 is warranted, stones 1, 2 and 3 will stand a modicum of scrutiny in light of the architectural enthusiasm they reveal. In principle, these early stones could have come from buildings located anywhere in Berwick, or even outside the town. Rubble from demolished medieval buildings was sometimes transported miles for reuse in post-Reformation England, but it seems unnecessary to think that the stones discussed here have travelled far. For one thing, the medieval town, and particularly the area around Bridge and West streets, was heavily built up from the 13th century, if not the 12th, and must have had many stone buildings. In this period, Berwick was the wealthiest port in Scotland, ‘so populous and busy that it might well be called a second Alexandria’, as the Lanercost chronicler put it (Maxwell 1913, 156; Hunter 1982, 67-85). Bridge and West streets were at the heart of its mercantile activity. An indication and effect of this is the fact that the major abbeys of Kelso and Melrose both owned properties (though not provably stone buildings) on Bridge Street (Ellison 1976, 147; Northumberland County

Council 2009, 13-16). Three religious institutions stood close to the north head of Berwick bridge: a Dominican house (its foundation in the 1230s attributed to King Alexander II), St Edward's Hospital (called *Domus Pontis* for its situation), founded around the same time or perhaps slightly earlier, and the hospital called God's House (i.e. *Domus Dei*; *Maison Dieu*), founded in the 1280s (Cowan and Easson 1976, 108, 116-17, 171-2; Ellison 1976, 161-2). Each will have had a stone church or chapel. Not all of the rubble these buildings yielded when they were demolished necessarily went back into construction, but some of it presumably did. On the face of things, carting building rubble to this area would have been like bringing coals to Newcastle. If the stones discussed here were large and retooled then one would need to ask whether they were brought in to do a particular job, but they are neither of these things.

This hypothesis may be wrong, but if it is accurate then the natural tendency is to think that the voussoirs came from one of the religious institutions. It is not known whether the chapels of the two hospitals were grand or otherwise, but a Dominican church with royal associations in such a prosperous town is likely to have been architecturally refined. The tympanum fragment cannot be assigned the same origin, because it was almost certainly made before the 1230s. All that can be said is that it comes from an unknown but ambitious building, and that if it was not imported from outside the town, then it is valuable evidence for the early stone architecture of Berwick. There is no certainty that this building – wherever it stood – was a church. Important mercantile and domestic buildings may have sported such features and one would never know it, for the elevations of all have vanished without trace. It may simply be added of this stone that its exiguousness is emblematic of what has become of medieval Berwick. As the authors of a recent article note: 'Few if any other British towns of comparable size and antiquity have suffered such a comprehensive obliteration of the above ground evidence for their medieval past' (Cambridge, Gates and Williams et al. 2001, 33).

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