

Rock of Ages: Mediaeval Stonemasons - The Architects of Europe

James Wright, MOLA

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Notes by Anna Moore

James Wright introduced himself as Senior Archaeologist (Buildings) at Museum of London Archaeology. However, he had started his professional life as a stonemason, working on many historic buildings including Newstead Abbey, the home of Lord Byron.

During the medieval period, there was no differentiation between the professions of stonemason and architect. Talented stonemasons rose through the ranks to become project managers who designed the layout of a building and some, but only a few, of their names have been recorded, e.g. Master James of St George, Savoy, the designer of medieval Welsh castles. His buildings are recognisable by their distinctive style of garderobe.

There are very few architects drawings from this time, but a 'setting out' floor still exists at York Minster, where several designs for details of the building have been laid out.

Quarrying: certain areas of Britain are poor in stone so imports were used, but generally local stone was used to keep costs down. The limestone belt which crosses England from south-west to the east midlands has been particularly useful for providing stone. Some quarries, e.g. Portland, have been in use for millennia. Stone is selected at the quarry for quality, the better stone coming from the deepest layers. Although modern quarrying uses explosives, during the medieval period a much older technique was used; that of inserting plugs into the stone and then hammering them until the stone splits. The stone was transported by water, being cheaper than overland.

A 'banker mason' was the first person to work on the stone – a 'banker' being the timber workbench. The banker shaped the piece of stone into a square using axes and hammers, ending up with a cube; finishing tools were used for finer work. Timber templates (or templets) were used to draw on the design for mouldings. The surface could be finished in various decorative ways, e.g. furrowed, some more time-consuming and skilful than others.

Quality control marks were then put on by the foreman and finally the banker mark by the mason, now known as masons' marks, e.g. ±, and once this was done, the mason would be paid.

Stonemasons grouped themselves into guilds – hence Freemasons – and masons' guilds became very powerful. The apron worn by modern freemasons is derived from the leather working apron of medieval stonemasons.

Once the stones were shaped, building work was done by fixer masons. Most medieval buildings are constructed of rubble core walling, the rubble core often being made of masons' rubble. Putlog holes were inserted for scaffolding; stones were lifted to the top of the wall by various methods, e.g. windlass. Arches and vaults were constructed around a timber former.

Carving and sculpture; the toolkit is similar to the masons' but smaller and finer. Popular sculptural themes included a rebus (visual wordplay), a religious message, a green man, a grotesque figure or gargoyle; symbols of evil, e.g. the Lincoln Imp, were often included.

Developing styles of medieval stonemasonry:

Anglo-Saxon, typified by massive walling, small windows, blind arcading
Late Anglo-Saxon/Norman; still massive but with different, lighter mouldings

Norman/Transitional; gothic (pointed) arches but also rounded arches and barrel vaults

Gothic/Early English; fully gothic, very pure architecture, vertical columns

Gothic/geometric decorated; much fancier design

Curvilinear decorated; free design, more experimental

Perpendicular; columns designed on a hexagon, mullions go from bottom to top without being broken by decoration

There is a typology of mouldings, enabling reasonably accurate dating of buildings or phases of buildings.

The final section of the presentation was a case study – Victoria Tower gardens in London. The Thames Discovery Programme is investigating this site at Westminster, recording masonry found on the foreshore.