

THE MELTON MOWBRAY “LEPER HEAD”: AN HISTORICAL AND MEDICAL INVESTIGATION

by

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For the last forty years, the vestry of St Mary’s Church, Melton Mowbray, has been home to a remarkable, yet little known, piece of medieval sculpture known locally as the “leper head” and linked by tradition to the nearby hospital foundation at Burton Lazars. Doubts have been cast on this over the years by both professional and amateur historians, who have alleged that the distinctive features of the head merely represent damage or are part of a broader and more commonplace medieval tradition of grotesques, good examples being on display in the south porch of Bakewell Church, Derbyshire. The purpose of the present paper is to examine the “leper head” in its historical and medical context in order to establish its likely provenance and identity.

BURTON LAZARS HOSPITAL AND THE “LEPER HEAD”

The site of Burton Lazars Hospital lies adjacent to the village of the same name just off the A606 road between Melton Mowbray and Oakham, in Leicestershire. Founded in about 1150, it was the principal English house of the crusading order the Knights of St Lazarus, established in the Holy Land in the early twelfth century to defend the faith and provide succour for lepers.¹ The hospital was always an institution of some importance. It eventually obtained ten daughter houses, or related preceptories, and when the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was drawn up in 1535, it had an annual income of almost £236, putting it amongst the wealthier hospital foundations of medieval England.² Indeed, writing at about the same time, the antiquarian John Leland described it as “a very fair Hospital and collegiate Church”, suggesting that its physical appearance matched its paper valuation.³

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¹ P. B. de la Grassiere, *L'ordre militaire et hospitalier de Saint-Lazare de Jerusalem*, Paris, J. Peyronnet, 1960; J. G. Nichols, *History and antiquities of Leicestershire*, London, Nichols, 1795–1811, 2: 272–76; *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, London, Archibald Constable, 1907–64, 2: 36–39.

² *Valor ecclesiasticus*, London, Commissioners on the Public Records, 1810–34, 4: 153.

³ L. T. Smith, *The itinerary of John Leland*, London, G. Bell, 1906–10, 4: p. 18. The history of Burton Lazars Hospital and the Knights of St Lazarus in England is currently being written by a Research Group based at the University of Nottingham Centre for Local History.

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Although documentary records attest the considerable importance of the hospital, not a great deal is known about the site itself. A large area of the site has been mapped, but excavation is, at present, prohibited, so conclusions regarding it must remain tentative.

Documentary evidence points to the existence of several buildings, such as a chapel, chapter-house, and gatehouse, but these are difficult to locate on site.⁴ Similarly, site finds have been limited to surface finds, and these are solely fragments of pottery or floor tiles, confirming human habitation but little else. In only one place on the site does a fragment of rough stone wall protrude above the surface of the ground, and only one stone has been located which shows evidence of having been worked by a mason. The only excavation to be carried out at Burton Lazars was undertaken in 1913 by the Marquis of Granby, who uncovered a remarkable series of late medieval floor tiles, now in the British Museum. Sadly, the advent of the First World War and the generally amateur approach of the excavators ensured that the only record kept of the excavation was perfunctory.⁵ For the archaeologist therefore, the general situation is discouraging: at the moment the interpretation of the site rests largely with the experienced fieldwalker who might piece together fragments of information from documents and the landscape.

After the Dissolution, it appears that the hospital buildings were occupied for some years as a secular dwelling, another factor which complicates site interpretation. It is likely that important changes were carried out between 1540 and 1640, when many of the original hospital buildings were, in all probability, adapted or destroyed, a supposition confirmed by a Parliamentary survey undertaken in 1648. When this house was finally abandoned in about 1700, the site reverted to pasture, and useful building stone was carried off for use in adjacent villages or in Melton Mowbray, about a mile away.⁶ This helps to explain the lack of readily identifiable material on site. It would seem reasonable to suppose that interesting or unusual pieces of sculpture might have been preserved as curiosities, and a story circulates that a previous owner of Burton Lazars Hall, (presumably Captain William Higson, occupier in the 1920s and 1930s), had a collection of carved stones from the hospital. These may have been gathered together during the seventeenth century, or, indeed, during the building of the Hall by Captain Ashton in the 1880s, the construction of which must have disturbed the old hospital site.⁷ The whereabouts of this collection is now unknown, but there are at least three possible escapees which deserve consideration, one of them being the "leper head".

Two of these possible Burton Lazars sculptures are built into the wall of a house on the south side of the village, and comprise representations of a man's head and a bird. However, archaeological opinion is doubtful as to their authenticity. Although the man's head bears some similarities to work executed in the late fifteenth and early

⁴ T. Bourne and D. Marcombe, *The Burton Lazars Cartulary: a medieval Leicestershire estate*, Nottingham, University of Nottingham Centre for Local History Records Series No. 6, 1987.

⁵ N. R. Whitcomb, *The medieval floor-tiles of Leicestershire*, Leicester, Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society, 1956, pp. 12–13, 25–6.

⁶ P. E. Hunt, *The story of Melton Mowbray*, Grantham, Leicestershire County Council, 1979, pp. 23–4, 43.

⁷ E. R. Kelly, *Directory of Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland*, London, Kelly, 1881, 1925, 1936.

sixteenth centuries, it also looks suspiciously like Victorian revivalism, and this latter attribution fits better with the historical facts. After the general decline of leprosy in the fourteenth century, a period of stagnation and contraction set in at Burton Lazars, only one pauper inmate being recorded in the hospital in 1535.⁸ The centre of operations for the Order was shifting increasingly towards its London house at St Giles-in-the-Fields, Holborn, and it is therefore unlikely that substantial building work was being undertaken at Burton Lazars.⁹ A Victorian dating seems, therefore, likely to be confirmed and, indeed, has been so by research undertaken after the completion of this paper. Fortunately, the “leper head” has a slightly better provenance. It is known to have been in the old Bede House Museum at Melton Mowbray prior to its closure in 1947, with a strong tradition (but no written authentication) that it came from Burton Lazars.¹⁰ On the closure of the museum it was removed to the vestry of St Mary’s Church where it has remained. The problems of relying on oral evidence such as this are obvious, and are well borne out by a story relating to the vestry itself. A tradition exists that the vestry was built of stones taken from Burton Lazars Hospital, but this is unlikely since it was completed in 1532, before the Dissolution. A similar story of migration of materials from Burton Lazars concerns fragments of medieval stained glass in the north windows of the church above the vestry. Although there is nothing in the subject matter of this glass that might link it with the hospital, the date of its placing in the church, sometime in the nineteenth century, at least gives the story a greater possibility of truth than the reuse of building stone.¹¹ Clearly, the oral tradition is vague and imprecise in specifics, but the underlying idea of a link between St Mary’s Church and Burton Lazars Hospital is a persistent and interesting one.

THE “LEPER HEAD”: SCULPTURE AND CLINICAL DIAGNOSIS

On stylistic grounds, the “leper head” can be dated to the period 1250–1350, when the hospital was both prosperous and expanding, and when it was possibly fulfilling a role as an institution for the management of leprosy sufferers. Building was almost certainly taking place at this period, and, unlike the previous sculptures, the “leper head” could well have been incorporated into an addition or alteration. Apart from the physical features, the only clue to identity is that the person depicted appears to be wearing some sort of cap (plate 1). It is not known whether or not this was part of a prescribed garb for inmates of this hospital. There are no surviving statutes for the Knights of St Lazarus; from the statutes of Sherburn Hospital, Durham, we know that the lepers were provided with the services of a tailor to make up their clothes, but there were no regulations governing style.¹² Although a form of uniform came to be common in institutions and almshouses after the sixteenth century, there is no evidence that this was common practice in the Middle Ages. There was no objection

⁸ *Valor ecclesiasticus*, op. cit., note 2 above.

⁹ M. B. Honeybone, ‘The leper hospitals of the London area’, *Trans Lond. Middx Archaeol. Soc.*, 1967, 21: 20–31.

¹⁰ Hunt, op. cit., note 6 above.

¹¹ J. R. Boyle, *The county of Durham*, London, Walter Scott, [n.d.], pp. 470–1.

¹² *Ibid.*

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to friends and benefactors from outside bringing in textile supplies for the use of the lepers, and even the woollen cloth for garments supplied by the Sherburn Hospital authorities came in a choice of colours, russet or white. All this would seem to argue against uniformity of dress.¹³

The sculpture measures 11 centimetres in vertical height from the head-dress to the chin, and has a maximum facial width of 10 centimetres. Damage is minimal and consists of superficial surface erosion of the midzone of the left cheek, some damage to the head-dress, some loss of the lateral third of the left supraorbital margin, and a chip from the left side of the lower lip. It is considered that all other features of the sculptures are as carved. The following are considered to be significant in diagnostic terms.

Eyes: Both eyes measure three centimetres in horizontal width and maximum one and a half centimetres in vertical height. Both lower eyelids are crescentic with a shallow V-shaped accentuation centrally. The right lower lid margin is everted and accentuated (plate 1a).

Nose: The nasal bone profile is intact as carved. The lower, *in vivo* cartilaginous, section of the nose is symmetrically collapsed (plate 2), a feature which is not due to later damage. The nasal orifices are accentuated (plate 1b) and further reinforce the portrayal of nasal collapse.

Mouth: The upper lip is withdrawn centrally (plate 1c), indicating central maxillary recession.

In clinical terms, leprosy is a chronic infective disease caused by *Mycobacterium leprae*, characterized in all its immunological types¹⁴ by irreversible damage to motor and sensory nerves, inducing, respectively, paralysis of muscles, and loss of skin sensation. One feature of motor nerve damage in the face is lagophthalmos, in which there is paralysis of the lower eyelids. Sagging, everted, lower eyelids with inability to close the eyes is characteristic. It is considered that the eyelids portrayed in the "leper head" specimen are compatible with lagophthalmos. In low-resistance leprosy, the lepromatous form of the disease, there are characteristic destructive changes in skeletal and soft tissues around the nasal and mouth cavities.¹⁵ These changes are due to the direct action of *Mycobacterium leprae* on the tissues. Nasal cavity infection produces destruction of the cartilaginous part of the nasal septum, with collapse of the bridge of the nose, thereby accentuating the nasal orifices. This feature is accurately portrayed in the sculpture. Direct involvement of the maxilla by *Mycobacterium leprae* results in absorption of bone substance centrally, and loss of central and lateral maxillary incisor teeth. Although there is no associated loss of soft tissue, the maxillary bone change results in a saucer-shaped profile of the midface on lateral view. This is illustrated in the sculpture. Lepromatous leprosy is also characterized by infiltration of the skin producing raised nodules. The irregularity of the right supraorbital margin may represent such a nodule.

The orbital, nasal, and oral changes portrayed by the "leper head" sculpture indicate that the carving is of the head of a person with advanced lepromatous

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ W. H. Jopling, *Handbook of leprosy*, London, William Heinemann Medical Books, 1984.

¹⁵ V. Møller-Christensen, *Leprosy changes of the skull*, Odense University Press, 1978, pp. 15–17.

leprosy. Whether this is a stylistic representation of the disease or is the portrayal of a specific infected individual is, of course, impossible to determine.

THE ICONOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

Although leprosy has frequently been portrayed in paintings,¹⁶ the disease has rarely been represented in sculpture. Of those figurines which have been considered to illustrate leprosy,¹⁷ very few exhibit features clearly pathognomonic of the disease. The terracotta of Athens described by Hoggan¹⁸ merely portrays a huddled figure suggestive of the dejection and ostracism associated with medieval leprosy. The Canaanite clay jar from Beth-Shan described by Yoeli¹⁹ has been examined by one of us (K.M.) and is considered to illustrate a Negroid head rather than the *facies leontina* of leprosy. A majolica from a leprosarium in Seville, discovered by Charcot and described by Gron²⁰ depicts a leprous subject with crutch and clapper. However, neither this nor the “roi lépreux” of Cambodia illustrated by Gron²¹ portray any of the physical signs of the disease. Several pottery vessels from Peru and Mexico have been considered possible leprosy representations, but there is considerable differential diagnostic doubt.²²

Within the recorded examples of sculpture therefore, the carved “leper head” from Melton Mowbray is unique in exhibiting the physical signs of *facies leprosa*. Assuming that this piece did come from Burton Lazars, why should the Knights have chosen to incorporate this sort of imagery in their building work? Although tasteless, perhaps, by modern standards, this sculpture nevertheless fits well into the context of the uncompromising iconography common in medieval religious art. Holy men did not shrink from the full horror of contact with their less fortunate neighbours, as this incident from the life of St Hugh of Avalon shows. Hugh, as Bishop of Lincoln in the late twelfth century, made a point of visiting the leper houses in his diocese, and he must have included Burton Lazars in this round. In them “he graciously imprinted kisses on the lips half eaten away by the leprosy—there was no mouth whose contact he shrank from . . . St Martin’s kisses healed a leper in the flesh (said St Hugh), but the leper’s kisses heal me of sickness of the spirit.”²³ Not everyone possessed the sanctity or moral courage of St Hugh, and for those who did not, visual images were the means whereby the holy state could be approached, particularly when a competitive commercial world tended to draw the Knights away from the pious intentions of their

¹⁶ K. Gron, ‘Leprosy and literature in art’, *Int. J. Leprosy*, 1973, 41(2): 249–83; W. B. Ober, ‘Can the leper change his spots?’, *Am. J. Dermatopath.*, 1983, Part 1, 5(1): 43–58; O. K. Skinses, ‘Travelogue of leprosy related art’, *Int. J. Leprosy*, 1972, 40(4): 414–16.

¹⁷ M. D. Grmek, *Les maladies à l’aube de la civilisation occidentale*, Paris, Payot, 1983, pp. 227–61; F. E. Hoggan, ‘The leper terra-cotta of Athens’, *J. Hellenic Stud.*, 1892, 13: 101–3; M. Yoeli, ‘A “facies leontina” of leprosy on an ancient Canaanite jar’, *J. Hist. Med.*, 1955, 10: 331–3.

¹⁸ Hoggan, *op. cit.*, note 17 above.

¹⁹ Yoeli, *op. cit.*, note 17 above.

²⁰ Gron, *op. cit.*, note 16 above.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² A. S. Ashmead, ‘Pre-Columbian leprosy’, *J. Am. med. Ass.*, 1893, 24: 622–6, 669–72, 721–3, 753–4, 803–7, 850–3.

²³ C. Garton, *The metrical life of St. Hugh*, Lincoln Cathedral Library Publications, 1986, pp. 6–7.



Plate 1. Leper head sculpture, anterior aspect. *A*: everted lower eyelid, suggestive of lagophthalmos. *B*: nasal orifices accentuated. *C*: withdrawal of upper lip.

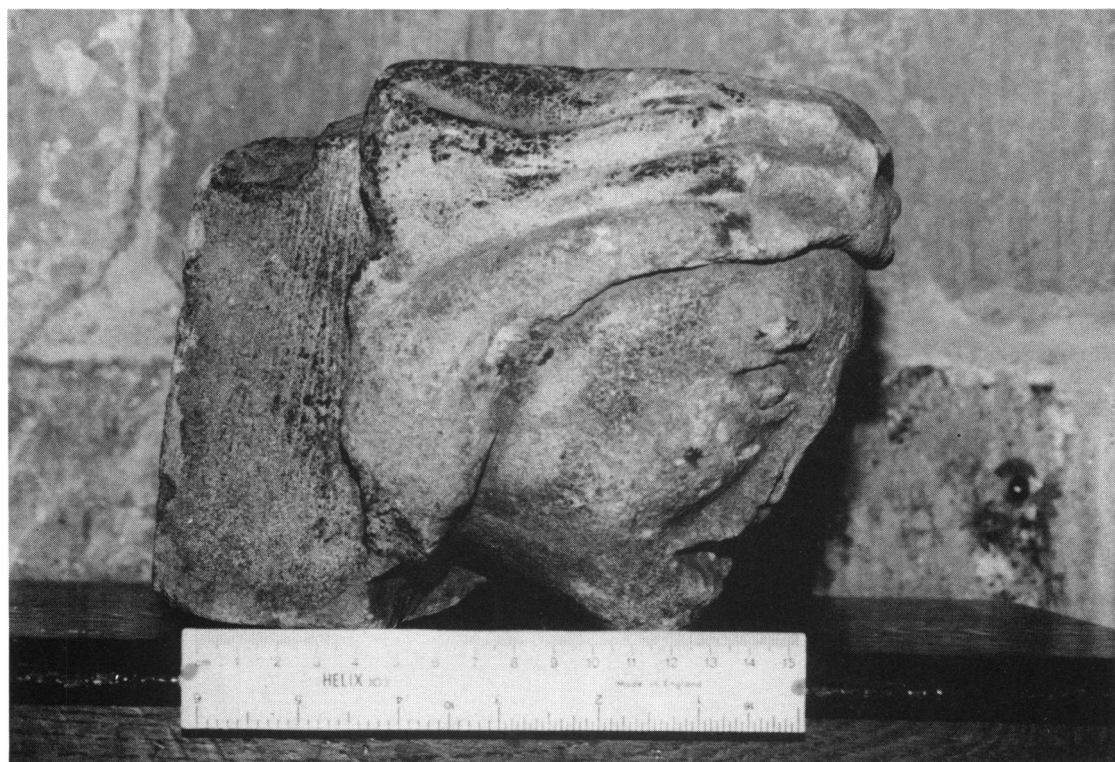


Plate 2. Leper head sculpture, lateral aspect. Collapse of the nasal bridge is visible.

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founders. Psychologically they needed constant reminders of their real *raison d'être*, particularly, perhaps, in the fourteenth century, which was a period of rapid transition for them.

A good illustration of the degree to which visual symbolism dominated the lives of the Knights is the quasi-mystical eight-pointed cross, which they came to share with the Hospitallers. The history of the Templars reveals even more dramatic examples, notably their alleged icon of a man's head, perhaps the vanished Byzantine Mandylion.²⁴ In the chapel of Burton Lazars there was an image of the mythical saint whose name the order bore, Lazarus, the man “full of sores” mentioned in the New Testament. The faithful were encouraged to make offerings there.²⁵ What was more natural than that this same iconography should be repeated in other parts of the institution? The “leper head” must have stood as a constant reminder and inspiration to the Knights, if not of what they were, then of what they should have been.

There will probably never be a documentary authentication for the “leper head”, nor certain knowledge of an on-site discovery. However, the circumstantial evidence of a link with Burton Lazars Hospital is strong. Even if the oral traditions concerning the specimen are discounted, the sculpture is old enough, and it is the sort of image likely to have been on display in the hospital. Moreover, there can be little doubt that it portrays an individual in an advanced stage of lepromatous leprosy. For the medieval period, this sort of representation appears to be unique. Its stark drama and distinctiveness, encapsulating what the Knights of St Lazarus stood for, must have made it a natural candidate for preservation when all around it had vanished.

²⁴ I. Wilson, *The shroud of Turin*, New York, Doubleday, 1978.

²⁵ *Valor ecclesiasticus*, op. cit., note 2 above.