

The 'Healing Chalice', an object of unknown use from Healing Church;
South Humberside.

Healing Church lies about 4 miles west of Grimsby in the diocese of Lincoln. In 1975 it was learnt that alterations were to be made and an excavation was arranged to examine an area on the south-side which was to be disturbed by the construction of an extension. This excavation was directed by Mr Hal Bishop who invited me to display this unusual object (fig. 0) which was discovered in the course of the excavation and submitted to the AM Laboratory for examination and conservation(1)

Before the recent alterations, the church consisted of a 15th century tower, a 18th century nave and a chancel of uncertain date; all to some extent disguised by a 1874 restoration. In addition the footings of a south aisle (demolished in 1774 because of its ruinous condition) were revealed in the 1975 excavation and dated as 12th/13th century on the basis of associated pottery. The area occupied by this aisle had been extensively used for burial and the bones of approximately 25 individuals were encountered, some of which pre-dated the aisle. The ground had been further disturbed by the builders of a late-Victorian boiler-house. The object came from this area and, because of these various disturbances, is of uncertain date.

When submitted to the Laboratory it was described as a chalice with the squashed remains of a paten(pl. 000). However, once it had been given some preliminary cleaning it was evident that it was nothing of the sort.(2)

There are three main elements. (a) the chalice-like body which is a copper/zinc alloy with significant amounts of lead and tin present. (b) 'handles' attached to the rim of the 'vessel' which are formed from copper tubes filled with lead and (c) a cross whose arms are made from sheet copper edged with brass and attached to the base of the 'vessel' by an iron rod which passes up through its stem and opens up to form a small cup on the inside of the vessel bowl. At the

centre of the cross is a decorative opening. There are indications that the whole object had been given a coat of gesso and then gilded. (3)

Close examination of the object leads to the impression that it is 'made up' with re-used material or has at least been modified. The two supposed handles were crudely soldered to the rim (one is now detached), a rough notch being cut into the lead-filled tube to fit it over the edge of the rim. Marks on the rim (and a surplus hole for a large pin or rivet) indicates that these handles have replaced an earlier fitting of unknown form.

Further, the two handles do not join to form a complete loop; nor apparently were they intended to. The free ends are not broken but terminate in an oblique cut face with a rivet hole passing through the wall of the tube and emerging in the cross-section. There are spare sections of tube with similar oblique cut ends carrying a rivet-hole. One explanation might be that these were attached to the two handles to form an S-shaped curve extension but this is by no means certain.

As for function, there appears to be no parallel to aid interpretation but a number of suggestions have been made. These fall into two categories depending upon which way up the object was used, i.e. whether the cross was uppermost (as in fig. 0) or hung downwards. In the former case one suggestion is that it took the form of a finial either surmounting a piece of wall furniture (high on the wall) or serving as a staff head (although the 'handles' would have obstructed its attachment to something else). A specific suggestion to fit the possibility that the cross hung downwards is that of a sanctuary lamp but there is no direct evidence to support this. The age of the object is also uncertain but the balance of opinion is that a late medieval date is likely.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) I am also indebted to Mr Bishop for the information on his excavation which is incorporated in this Note. The reconstruction was drawn by Mrs Heaser.
- (2) The conservation has been undertaken by Mrs M Hutchinson
- (3) The analyses have been carried out by Miss J Bayley using an X-ray fluorescence spectrometer.

CAPTIONS FOR PLATE AND FIG

Plate The Healing 'chalice' before conservation but after removal of soil. (Photo: Miss E Lawler, Ancient Monuments Laboratory)

Fig The Healing 'chalice': a partial reconstruction.