

1 x News / current affairs summary (1000 words) 25%

a summary of a current subject of debate within your chosen discipline

Recently a subject of debate has been brought up among archaeologists following an article published by several news stations including 'The Guardian' and 'The Sun' (among others) by archaeologist and building historian Jennifer Alexander, professor of architectural history at Warwick University, regarding what she defines as "witch marks" which is the colloquial term for apotropaic markings, a form of ritual protection often carved in wood or stone with the intent to protect against evil, often found in entrance ways to buildings [Historic England] however they have also been found in Caves, such as Goatchurch Cavern in North Somerset [Binding & Wilson] and on Sarcophagi such as Bishop John Harwell in Wells, Somerset [Binding] as well as a large number of other places.

Alexander claims that these 'witch marks' hold no form for ritual or religious significance and are just Mason marks stating that there is "*absolutely no evidence that these marks have anything to do with witches or any mystical meanings.*" [Alexander]

Alexander specifically targeted both Historic England and English Heritage for their public recognition for these markings as a form of ritual protection. As of this point neither Historic England or English Heritage have made a response to her criticism nor changed their public statements about these markings.

Archaeologist and author James Wright led a discussion and critic of this article on social media, namely with a post on *the BAJR - UK Archaeology* (British Archaeology Jobs and resources) official Facebook page. Wright says "*Jenny Alexander ignores archaeological context for apotropaic mark-making in favour of them all cut by masons*" [Wright-Facebook] Presenting Alexander's article as ignorant of the subject and bringing up the idea that Alexander ignores recent archaeological breakthroughs on the subject, which will remain a common point by other critics. Wright further describes her article as simply "*sad to see*"

This opinion is shared by Historian and Archaeologist Matthew Champion, who in his 2015 book *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches* wrote extensively on both apotropaic markings and masons marks and is firmly in the belief that these 'witch marks' are a form of apotropaic ritual protection rather than anything left by masons.

In response to James Wright's Facebook post encouraging discussion around the article, Champion responded highly critically to Alexander stating "*I have known Jenny (Jennifer Alexander) a long time, and her opinions haven't changed in nearly two decades. The research and evidence base has changed quite considerably in that time though*" [Champion, Facebook] simply put he describes Alexander's article as outdated and accuses her of ignoring facts and how archaeological understanding on the topic of apotropaic markings has developed recently.

Furthermore, Champion created his own in-depth post on the '*English medieval Graffiti*' Facebook page in which he focuses on Alexander's claims regarding the '*daisy wheel*' which she claims (as with other forms of apotropaic markings) are the work of masons, due to the "*lack of evidence*" [Alexander] of any ritual significance. Champion responds to this firstly by saying that "*There is evidence, in art and texts, as well as masses of graffiti*" referencing the large amount of analyses and evidence laid out by Brian Hoggard in his book '*Magical house protection: The Archaeology of Counter-Witchcraft*' in which Hoggard discusses the "Daisy wheels" also known as the Hex Flower or the Flower of Life, which is a symbol usually created in wood by callipers, however it has also been found drawn free hand and found in stone, ivory, silver, floor mosaics and even as parts of golden jewellery across the UK but also notably across almost every

European country and in parts of the Middle East and Asia [Hoggard]. The frequent appearance of the symbol outside of the context of building suggests that it is not just masons (if masons at all) who created them furthermore their meaning must be more than just building planning, which Alexander claims.

The second point Champion makes is when he claims he will play “*Devil’s Advocate*” [Champion, Facebook] He claims that in some scenarios these ‘daisy wheels’ could have been created by masons due to their use of compasses and grid patterns in their creation.

However, he further states that “*not one six petal rosette (daisy wheel) have I found that I can directly attribute to a mason*” [Champion, Facebook] His point being that it is definitely a possibility that some masons had a hand at creating some of these daisy wheels however there is a lack of evidence to prove this.

Behind the argument, is the point that research around apotropaic markings is, in the grand scheme of things, is a very new field of study within archaeology, with some of the earliest papers surrounding the subjects, such as Bindings work in Wookey hole and Goatchurch cavern being published in 2005 and Hoggard influential book being published in 2019. Discourse such as this can be very helpful for a newer field and can help find gaps within the theory as well as being more attention to the subject.

In conclusion Jenifer Alexanders article has shaken up the Archaeological world of apotropaic marking and ritual protection and has faced large amounts of criticism due to claims of her ideas being close minded and ignoring evidence.

Bibliography

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