

THE SLAB FROM THE NORTH PORCH

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The recent work at the entrance of the North Porch revealed a memorial slab immediately outside the threshold of the main door. Though this had been seen and described in the 19th and 20th centuries, its existence had been forgotten during the forty years in which a wooden ramp gave access to the church. Considering its interest and fragility, it was decided to lift the stone and place it in the north aisle of the quire, where it could be seen but not damaged.

The slab has been used twice, most recently in 1742. and originally in 1536. The earlier inscription is in Blackletter script, and runs around the edge of the slab. After considerable trouble this was read in 1929 by R.A.S. Macalister, the distinguished Professor of Celtic Archaeology at Dublin, a specialist in epigraphy. (*Transactions of the Thoroton Society*, 32 i 1929), p. 130).

The inscription is in Latin, in the form of a poem in repeating six and five stressed lines (hexameter and pentameters). The lines are terminated by the Greek letter Tau. which was for a time seen as the final letter in the alphabet, a position which is now commonly taken by the letter Omega.

The latin inscription:

"Spiritus archipotens subhumati flaminus, imo (Tau)

Dum vivit facinus ussit et alta: tuo (Tau)

Numine confiteare fleas; tum culmina celi (Tau)

E mundo latus redde rogamus ei "

Professor Macalister's translation:

"O all powerful spirit, the crime of the priest buried here, verily blazed up to the very utmost while he lived. Mayest thou confess to the Divinity, mayest thou weep. Then we pray, mayest thou restore to him the summits of heaven, having taken him out of the world"

Towards the head of the stone is a label with the inscription an[no] D[omine] 1536. A little below the centre is a lozenge with a heart and a blackletter inscription which has become very worn by the trample of feet entering the church, and cannot now be read in its entirety. It probably reads

Corde et carne sunt vilia sum | |us Vade qua es

It was a little clearer in 1929. and with some hesitation Macalister suggested a translation:

'Vile things are in my heart and flesh. I am very low. Begone'

presumably implying: **"do not stay near one so base"**. Below this is a large Tau cross, a symbol of the Franciscan Order, but here perhaps suggesting salvation and the Resurrection (see Ezechiel 9: 4)

The identity of the dead priest is not known, as was clearly the intention of the cutters of the slab. The date is suggestive, as religious tensions were running high in the first stages of the Reformation, and links can thus be made to the disputes.

In 1534 Henry VIII issued the Act of Supremacy (over the Church in England), and in 1535 St Thomas More and Bishop St John Fisher, and others, were executed for refusing the oath of obedience. In 1536 the Ten Articles extinguishing the authority of the Pope were published, and the first dissolution of the monasteries begun. Thus the priest died in the midst of violent upheaval, and his crime may have been simply to be on the wrong side in the clash. but there is nothing on the stone itself to demonstrate the nature of his crime. The anathema, however, suggests that it was indeed part of the Reformation crisis, rather than a personal sin, which would normally be mitigated by the Last Rites, at or after death.

Where the memorial was originally placed is not known. In its recent position it was apparently resited in 1742: examination before lifting showed that it was set on a series of brick and stone supports over a shallow void filled with soft earth. It is possible that Revd Phillips was buried here, but given the number of rearrangements in the church up to the 1880s, his grave may be elsewhere. His connection with the stone is shown by two inscriptions cut into its face. At the head of the stone is IP [for John Phillips]. Below this the inscription The Revd John Phillipps died Oct the 16 1742.

Revd Phillips B.A. was admitted as Vicar Choral to the Minster on November 17th. 1737 and his office was filled on April 5th. 1744. after his death. The stone says that he died October 16th. 1742. so that he was quite a young man. in its position in the porch, the slab was laid with its head to the west, and this has been replicated in resiting it in the quire, but as the memorial to not one but two priests it should certainly have once been laid with the head to the east.