

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

A FURTHER GRAVE COVER FROM OULTON

by PAUL DRURY

IN THE POSTSCRIPT TO 'The medieval tile-makers of Oulton', published in the previous volume of this journal, anticipated the full publication, presented here, of another fragmentary grave cover then recently recovered from the churchyard.¹ Parts of two ceramic slabs (T16–17), the larger (T16) in three joining fragments (modern breaks) once formed parts of an anthropomorphic grave cover (Figs 164–166).² Extensive wear on the upper face clearly shows that it, too, had originally been set into the church floor.

The fabric closely resembles that of the 'line-impressed' slabs previously published, but the slabs are thinner (*c.*30mm). Each was formed from at least two balls of clay, these appearing in section as layers 'scarfed' together, the layers tending to separate in firing, to the extent that oxygen penetrated parts of the lap, as is clear in Fig. 164, where modern damage removed part of the lower layer.³ Most of the core is reduced, extending to the top surfaces, whose lead glaze is predominantly grey-green in colour. The surfaces are smoothed and the edges are slightly undercut, seemingly with a knife, but the corners were rounded off probably in subsequent handling of the slabs before firing. On the underside are multiple stab holes, formed with a tool of rectangular cross-section, tapering to a chisel-like point, primarily intended to assist in the even firing of the comparatively thick slabs, but also providing a key for the bedding mortar which in part still fills them.

Modelled elements were luted onto the surface of T16. The element assumed to be the head, of which half the perimeter survives, was partly hollow (Fig. 165: A), the interior of the void oxidised bright red, probably because it was connected to one of the stab holes. Most of the face was lost when the slab was still on the floor, since the lower part of the broken edge is abraded. Below are the remains of an applied hand and forearm (Fig. 165: B), the fingers indicated by incisions in the surface, surviving at the (abraded) wrist and fingertips; but most of the hand and all the forearm have split away from the slab. The outline of the hand is asymmetrical, indicating that the thumb was pointing inwards. Below the head is a slight projection, apparently shaped with a knife, probably adjacent to an applied element largely lost but which may have influenced the break line below. Further down, its scar just about survives (Fig. 165: C), with some knife-trimmed, vertical emphasis to the left of its limit.

The fragment of a second slab, T17 (Fig. 166), lacks modelled elements; the substantial and even wear on the surface suggests most, probably all, of T17 was plain and was placed below T16. The complete corner indicates a substantial taper; the angle has been used to align the drawing of T16 (Fig. 165), which retains only one intact edge. The position of the top edge of T16 can be suggested by the row of stab holes along which it broke by assuming, given the position of the head, that they were the first such row. Similarly, one can suggest that the bottom extended far enough to allow the arm to be modelled to the elbow. If the head was central, T16 was about 0.34m wide at the top; if the slab were the same height, the arm would fit comfortably on it. On that basis, the surviving part of T17 represents more than half of the width of the top, consistent with the surface pattern of reduction of the core. If the underlying module was the same as T16, the monument (tentatively reconstructed in Fig. 166) would be

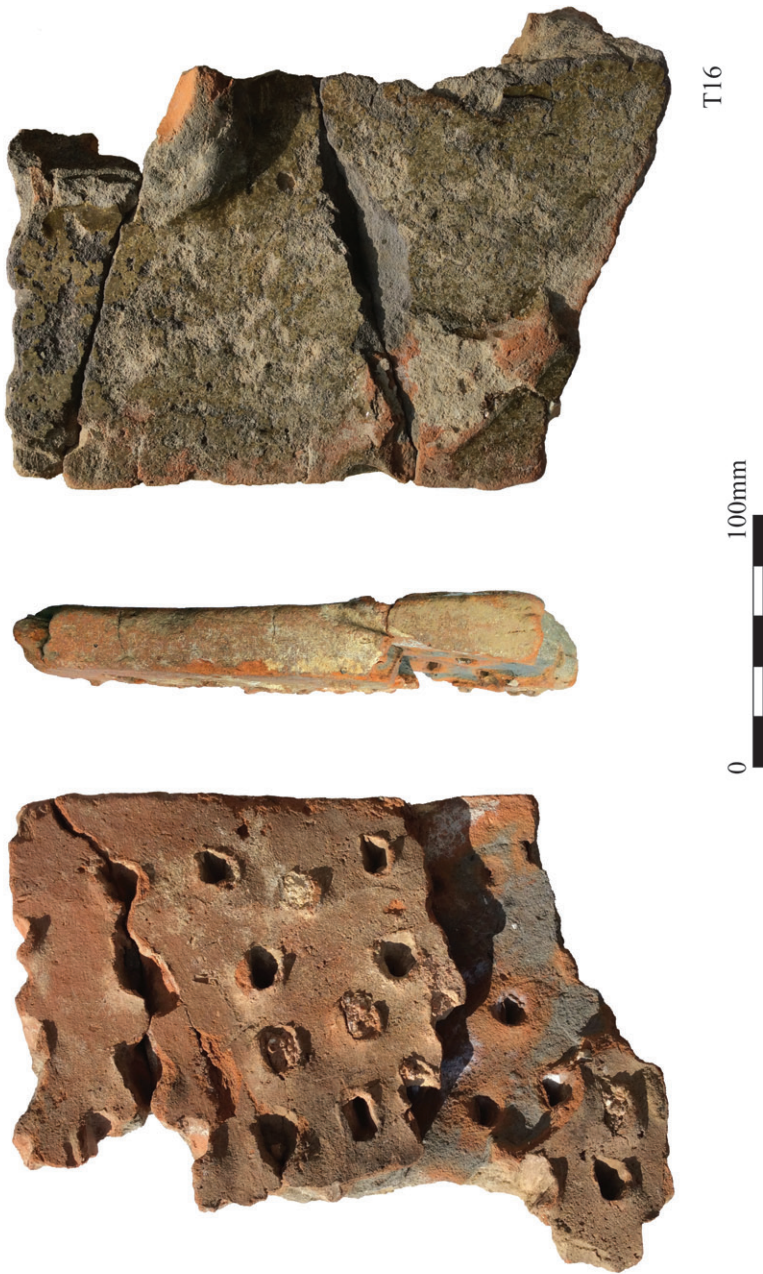


FIG. 164 – The upper slab (T16) of the Oulton ‘stabbed’ grave cover. Scale 1:3 (*photo: Sue Holden*).

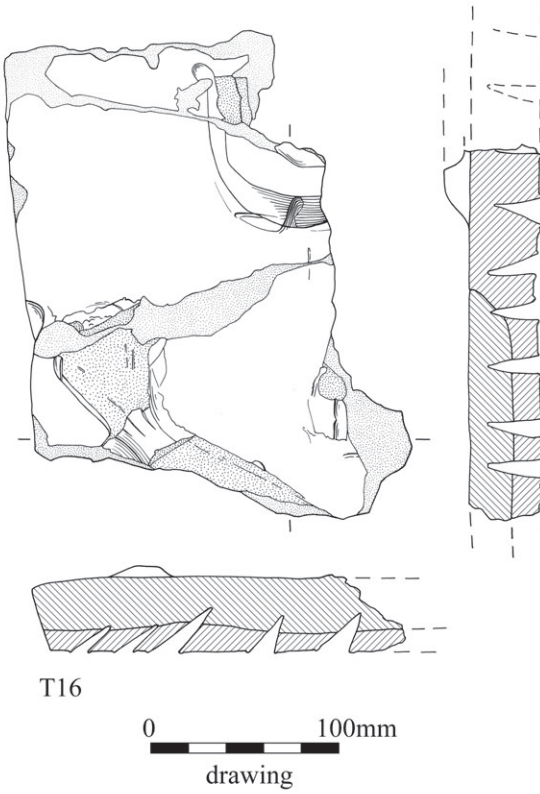


FIG. 165 – Drawing (scale 1:4) and enlarged details of the upper slab (T16) of the Oulton 'stabbed' grave cover. (photo: Sue Holden).

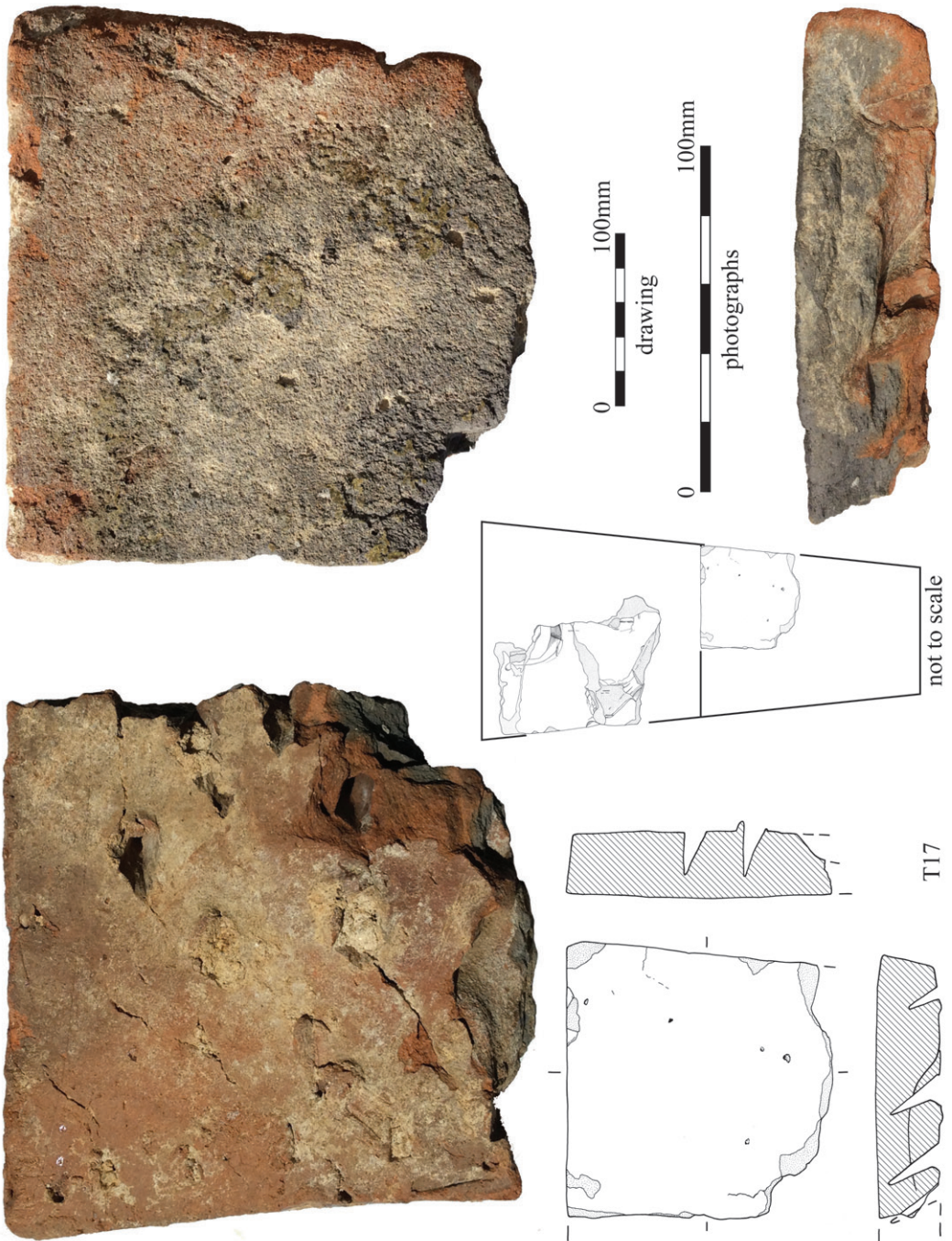


FIG. 166 – The lower slab (T17) of the Oulton 'stabbed' grave cover, with a key diagram suggesting the intended form of the complete monument. Scales 1:4 (drawing), 1:2 (photos). (photo: Sue Holden).

c.0.64m long, with a median width of c.0.27m. That is about one-third life-size, but with such a pronounced taper the cover could hardly be longer.

This monument therefore appears to have been semi-effigial, with only the head and upper body modelled. However, it is difficult to reconcile with the standard iconography. The hands are not folded to the front in an attitude of prayer, nor folded across the chest. If the figure was depicted on its back, in the conventional manner, it would have a left arm but no right shoulder. However, it makes sense if the figure was depicted in profile or semi-profile, so that the 'hand' is in fact both hands folded in prayer and the largely lost element extending to the right of centre represented the upper arm and torso.⁴ This suggests the possibility that the model was perhaps a donor panel in a window or even a brass, where such figures occur, albeit rarely, from the fourteenth century.⁵

The style of modelling of the arm and hand, particularly, recalls that found at smaller scale on face jugs, particularly the way in which these elements are applied, and the delineation of the fingers and the opposing thumb of hands by knife cuts. Such jugs were produced at several English pottery production centres, particularly between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fourteenth centuries, with a major regional centre at Grimston, near King's Lynn.⁶ Its products tend to be found over a much wider area than even its other glazed fine wares, whose general distribution did not quite reach the east coast in the Oulton area.⁷ One example from Norwich has a disembodied face and arms.⁸ An example from the Mill Green production centre in central Essex has only one arm depicted.⁹ Further afield, a jug from the mid-thirteenth-century Laverstock kilns in Wiltshire shows particularly clearly the typical depiction of hands, one of which is clasping a (hidden) object suspended from a ribbon around the neck.¹⁰

The slabs forming this grave cover are very different from the other semi-effigial examples previously published from Oulton, both in their iconography and their techniques of fabrication of both slab and applied details. Both are closer to a potter's than a tiler's repertoire. Given the so far unique occurrence of English medieval ceramic grave covers at Oulton, and their similar fabric, there is no doubt that this one was made in the same locality as those previously published. They must belong to a local, indeed parochial, tradition to which, perhaps, both tilers and potters contributed.¹¹ That both trades worked in the parish is evident both from tile wasters and from the lay subsidy return of 1327, which included 'Robert le Pottere' in the '*Villata de Oltone cum Flyxtone*'.¹² He was assessed at 8d, nominally representing one twentieth of his movable goods. The date would place Robert's presence in the parish centrally within the date bracket of the first half of the fourteenth century previously suggested for the Oulton tilers, both trades presumably attracted by the qualities of the local clay.¹³

NOTES

1 Drury 2018, 209.

2 The numbering continues from Drury 2018.

3 The fabric has at least one flint about 7mm cube. Limescale has penetrated the thin void between the applied hand and the body, presumably post-deposition.

4 I am grateful to Sue Holden for this observation.

5 I am grateful to Nigel Saul for his comments on interpretation, and for drawing attention in particular to a brass to Richard Billington (d.1432) at St Bene't's, Cambridge (Lee 2018, 22, plate 2). Other rare instances on incised slabs include Sire Pieres Kavengniaus, Amiens, c.1250 and Willaume de Maude, Tournai, 1418 (Greenhill 1976, plates 105b and 21a respectively).

6 Leah 1994, especially fig. 59 33–37; Clarke and Carter 1977, 206–10 and fig. 91.

7 Leah 1994, 117–8 and fig. 76; their general distribution stops 10–15km short of the east coast here.

8 Jennings 1981, fig. 18.344.

- 9 Pearce *et al.* 1982, fig. 9.20; British Museum 1856,0701.1571.
- 10 Musty *et al.* 1969, fig. 19.140; for the date, *ibid.*, 92–3.
- 11 Nigel Saul has kindly drawn my attention to two early post-medieval ceramic grave covers at Lingfield, Surrey dating (on costume) from the 1520s, each formed on three slabs, overall size 1.2m x 0.4m. They are in a fine sandy fabric, off-white, tinged pink and grey, with *sgraffiato* engraving through a 1mm layer of dark red slip. Usually said to be foreign, the fabric resembles Surrey whiteware, so they may be local. See Greenhill 1976, i.1 (wrongly implying white slip), 4, 223; ii.17, plate 124b.
- 12 Drury 2018, 209; Hervey 1906, vii, 96. There is no obviously identifiable tiler in the vill. ‘Alano le Tyliere’ of nearby Kessingland was assessed at 18d (*ibid.*, 93), but the term ‘tiler’ could refer to fixers as well as makers. I am grateful to David Sherlock for these references.
- 13 Drury 2018, 208.

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