A Furnished Grave in the Cemetery of St Benet’s Church

An *Insight* Report

By Nicola Rogers
During excavations by York Archaeological Trust in 1989 – 1990 at 12-18 Swinegate and 14 Little Stonegate/18 Back Swinegate, 100 burials associated with the church of St. Benet’s were revealed, scattered across 15 trenches. No longer in existence, the church is recorded as having been demolished sometime before 1316, although there is no record of the date of its foundation; the excavations, however, have proved that burials in the cemetery of St. Benet had begun by the 890s, and certainly continued into the late 11th/early 12th centuries.

The most densely packed burials were situated in two trenches along Back Swinegate which were approximately opposite the entrance from Back Swinegate onto Finkle Street, and in one of these trenches, the only burial within the cemetery to have been accompanied by grave goods was excavated. This was an adult inhumation, identified as a mature male, of 46 years of age or older, who had been placed in his grave with his arms crossed onto the right hand side of his pelvis. Unlike many of the other burials in the cemetery, there were no indications that a coffin or shroud had been used. An osteological analysis of the skeleton revealed that the man had been c.173cm (approximately 5 feet 8 inches) tall, which was average for the period, and that he had a well healed fracture to his right wrist and evidence of a crush fracture in his spine. Study of his teeth indicated that some of his molars and all his incisors were heavily worn while the rest of his teeth exhibited relatively little wear. These wear patterns were interpreted as possibly reflecting a habitual activity that involved using the teeth as a tool. He also had five dental abscesses, all of which would have caused him great pain and made chewing food or talking difficult.

The man was found to have been buried with an iron knife, an iron buckle and a stone hone, the iron objects having been positioned one on each side of the pelvis, whilst the original position of the hone was unfortunately unclear.

![Figure 1: The stone hone, the iron buckle, and the iron knife.](image-url)
The knife is largely complete, and is of a form known as whittle tang, which means that the blade has a projection at the handle end of the knife; this would have been socketed into a wooden handle, of which some slight remains can be seen. The shape of the blade which is angled down from the back to the tip is a well recognised form which is commonly seen on knives of the 8th – 10th centuries. At 11.5cm long, with a blade length of 8.2cm this is a fairly average sized knife, for which no particular application can be suggested; it is certainly not, however, a dagger or weapon, so there is no suggestion that this particular man was any sort of warrior.

![Figure 2: The iron knife.](image)

The iron buckle retains part of the buckle plates by which it would have been attached to a leather belt, and there appear to be leather remains surviving within the plates. There is a rounded projection on the buckle at the point where the pin tip rests, and the frame is decorated with grooves and has been inlaid with tin. Similar buckles were found at Coppergate, where it was thought that iron objects, including tin-plated dress fittings such as buckles were being made across two tenements in the 10th century.

![Figure 3: The iron buckle.](image)
The stone hone or whetstone is made of a very fine grained stone, and it has a well drilled perforation towards the top end of the hone, which indicates it could have been hung from a belt. With a total length equal to the length of the knife blade, this would have made a perfect sharpener for its accompanying knife. Overall, the objects recovered and the findspots of the iron objects at the pelvis and thus close to the waist, strongly suggest the man in this burial was laid to rest by his kin wearing a belt from which were suspended his knife and hone, and that this occurred in the 10th century.

Burials of both men and women of this period are occasionally - but rarely - accompanied by any grave goods. Another very similarly furnished burial, also found within a churchyard, was however excavated in York at St. Mary Bishophill Junior in the 1960s. In this instance an adult male had been buried with a small iron knife, a hone and a decorated copper alloy buckle plate (presumably all that remained of a buckle). A coin dated to A.D. c.905-915 was also found amongst the finger bones, indicating a probable date for the burial of the early 10th century. This appears remarkably similar to the burial at St. Benet’s, and it seems quite possible that these two burials could be roughly contemporaneous.

We will never quite know what was the significance of the objects in the St Benet’s burial; should we assume they were considered to be important to the man to whom they belonged, and that he asked to be buried accompanied by them, or was that decision made by his family or friends? Perhaps he used them in his trade or occupation – perhaps he was a craftworker? Or do they simply represent items associated with his everyday clothing, being simple tools that any man of the time might possess? We can only speculate, but they surely do mark him out as different in some way to the others buried alongside him.
This series of *Insights* has been contributed by York Archaeological Trust staff members and external specialists for Finding the Future. They aim to frame an understanding of aspects of the Trust’s collection of artefacts and their archaeological context; and also to enhance staff involvement. The authors represent a broad range of experience and knowledge.

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