

Graffiti Marks on Stones inside Markinch Tower

When we removed modern plaster from the walls inside Markinch tower a few years ago we were careful to photograph all the graffiti marks that people had made since about 1940. However, this piece is about ancient graffiti and what it can tell us about the tower and its history. These were scratchings that were never meant to be seen by later generations.

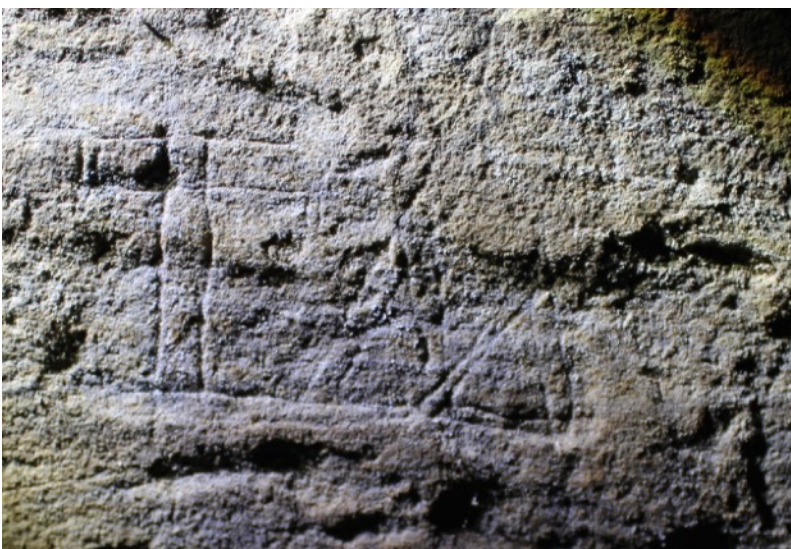


When the first was spotted on the wall within the tower it was a bit of a puzzle. The H-shaped mark has been carefully chiseled onto a stone that also has a regular mason's mark with a butterfly shape. This was probably a senior mason and his mark appears on other stones elsewhere in the tower. The H-mark is obviously special as it appears nowhere else within the building and there is only one other occasion when two marks have been made on a stone (also featuring the butterfly mark but probably marking the end of an apprenticeship).



The meaning of the H-mark becomes clear when we set it alongside the stonework on the tower. The senior mason is instructing the other masons how to cut and set the stone blocks in place using the Norman method of "half-bonding". Today, we wouldn't look twice at a brick wall built that way but the technique adds great strength to a building and ensures that cracks don't appear along weak spots. The great regularity of the stonework on Markinch tower is exceptional and this was the result of imported techniques designed for both strength and speed of construction. It was at its time very much state-of-the-art.

Another piece of ancient graffiti that was difficult to interpret is shown in the third photo. I'm fairly sure that it represents the original hammer beam crane that was used to lift the blocks to the top of the tower (where the drawing was found). On one end is a counter-weight and on the other a rope. The A-shaped objects on the right would seem to be roof trusses on the old nave of the church.



Finally, on the same upper level, someone has carved the initials AP with a distinctive letter A (similar to others of the 11th/12th centuries). It is right beside a deeply engraved cross that may be a dedication cross. We have to resort to guesswork to interpret this but an early vicar, a member of the MacDuff family, may have been called Aed (pronounced A-eth) and so the initials may stand for Aed Presbitero, Latin for Aed the Priest.

