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Villam le Geometer?

by E. Ward
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VILLAM LE GEOMETER?

In *B. & G. Transactions*, v. 60, 1938, p. 342, there is a description of a 13th century coffin slab discovered in 1923 below the vestibule of the Chapter House of Bristol Cathedral, and now lying in one of the Berkeley recesses in the north aisle.

The slab was attributed by Prof. Fawcett to William the Geometer, presumed to be designer of the Lady Chapel, and if this were correct it would be an architectural relic of the first magnitude, antedating the memorial of Richard of Gainsborough *c.* 1325 and the window in Winchester College Chapel *c.* 1393 commemorating William Wynford, to name but two of the very few direct links still existing of great artists of the period.

The slab is broken transversely, from which a small piece of stone became lost which hitherto was assumed to contain the letter G, thereby providing the vital initial necessary to complete the surname and render the inscription on the south bevelled part VILLAM LE GEOMETER.

Unfortunately, the evidence of the stone itself does not support the theory.

The accompanying sketch shows the actual dimensions of the slab as it now lies, the previously published figures being mostly incorrect. This sketch shows that whatever the initial of the surname, the whole word could not have been GEOMETER, for there were originally not eight letters but seven, and the small piece of stone lost contained not an additional letter but only part of one.

This is clear from the following:—

1. The spacing of letters forming each word is reasonably consistent all round the slab. It varies from word to word but does not change significantly in any given word. Therefore had there been a G the two halves of the slab would have to be about $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches further apart than they now lie.

2. Each word is separated from the next by punctuations, and here the relationship of these dots to the letters is remarkably consistent. Those dots between the words EIT and MERCI are specially important because they are on the

head side of the break in the slab, and inductively, they indicate that the slab when whole was very slightly shorter than the two parts now lie, because the spacing is $3\frac{1}{8}$ inches on one side of the word EIT and 3 inches on the other. Had the slab originally been long enough to contain the 8 lettered word GEOMETER the spacing between these dots and their associated letters would have had to be about $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches and 3 inches, which is entirely inconsistent with the rest of the spacings.

3. To accommodate the letter G then another $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length is necessary. But since the slab is tapered at approx. 1 in 22, on a hypothetical strip $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches long there would be a difference in width of at least $\frac{1}{4}$ inch between the top and bottom broken portions. No such width difference can be detected.

It therefore seems clear that the name was VILLAM LE (?)OMETER and that there still remains part of the original initial letter. It could be an E or an S, for in the latter case there is a resemblance to the initial of SA on the opposite bevel.

I am indebted to Mr Arthur Sabin for the suggestion that the complete word was SOMETER, from the old French *le Sometier*, which seems highly probable. Kelham ('Dict. of Norman French' 1779) gives SUMETER = the proveditor for the garrisons; Cowell ('Law Dictionary' 1708) SAUME, SOMME = any burden or load of a horse and Cowell ('Interpreter' 1607) SUMMAGE = toll for horseback loads. In a later form there is SUMPTER, of which several appear as surnames in local records, e.g. William Sumpter, 1361, mentioned in Bickley, *L.R.B.* vol. I, p. 100.

Since LE'EOMETER is difficult to accept, the reluctant conclusion therefore is that the slab commemorates not an architect of the Abbey but more likely one of its provenders, whose contribution was to the human fabric rather than the material one.

E. WARD