

REINHARD LAMP

The Sepulchre of the Priest John Blodwell in Holy Trinity Church, Balsham, Cambridgeshire d. 16th April 1462

Or how an inattentive text-cutter caused havoc



Fig. 1: The church of Holy Trinity, Balsham, photo Kevin Herring.

SITE

The village of Balsham lies on a hill east of Cambridge. In Roman times an important street ran in a straight line from the town to Balsham (and probably further). It started out as a double-lane artery, carrying traffic in one-way directions, but after a while one lane became engulfed in bushes, and later the surviving one was strangled by brambles, leaving

only a narrow path. Seen from the distance the squat tower of the church barely rises above the surrounding trees.



Fig. 2: The nave of Holy Trinity,
photo Kevin Herring

The church possesses two great brasses to medieval priests, John Sleaford (d. 13 October 1391) and John Blodwell (d. 16 April 1462). As far as we know, Blodwell's grave is just outside the chancel-screen, Sleaford's inside. In deference to those two high dignitaries the brasses were relaid in the 19th century, side by side, in front of the altar-steps.

This essay analyzes the brass to John Blodwell.



Fig. 3: The chancel of Holy Trinity, photo Kevin Herring.

The Commemorated¹

John Blodwell was probably born around 1380, the illegitimate child of a married priest, and had dispensation to become ordained, and later to omit all reference to his birth. Judging by his name he came from Llan-y-Blodwell, a village in Shropshire on the Welsh borders. He studied the Law at Bologna, qualified in Civil, and later in Canon Law, and then set out on a very eventful clerical career, multiplying appointments and prebends.

Parallel to his clerical career, Blodwell pursued a diplomatic line, to which he probably gave priority of attendance. In Rome he gained a position dealing with the Vatican's diplomatic correspondence. He was chosen to be on a commission to the Council of Constance (1414-18), probably due to his competence in foreign languages, as his epitaph bears out. When a fellow-member of his committee was elected Pope, Blodwell received a highly complimentary letter from him. He was also seen in the King's service, acting as emissary to foreign courts.

From 1430 onwards he seems to have concentrated on his clerical career in England. He became canon of various cathedrals: Hereford, Lichfield, Wells, St.David's, and in 1439 finally settled for the parish-church of Balsham, in the diocese of Ely. Not long afterwards he lost his eyesight, which must have grieved him sorely.² After a long time living in darkness he died, and was buried in his church with a magnificent brass monument to commemorate him.

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- 1 Biographical information is from Emden, A. B., *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to A.D. 1500*, 3 vol., Oxford, 1957-9, I, p. 202-203; Girard, W.N.C., *John Blodwell Rector of Balsham*, in: *TRANSACTIONS of the Monumental Brass Society*, XV, part 2, 1993, p. 119-136; isdem, *Balsham Church Guide to the Brasses*, private publication, loc. cit., 1998.
 - 2 From the sequence of his resignations Girard concludes that Blodwell grew blind in the early years of his forties, loc. cit., p. 5.

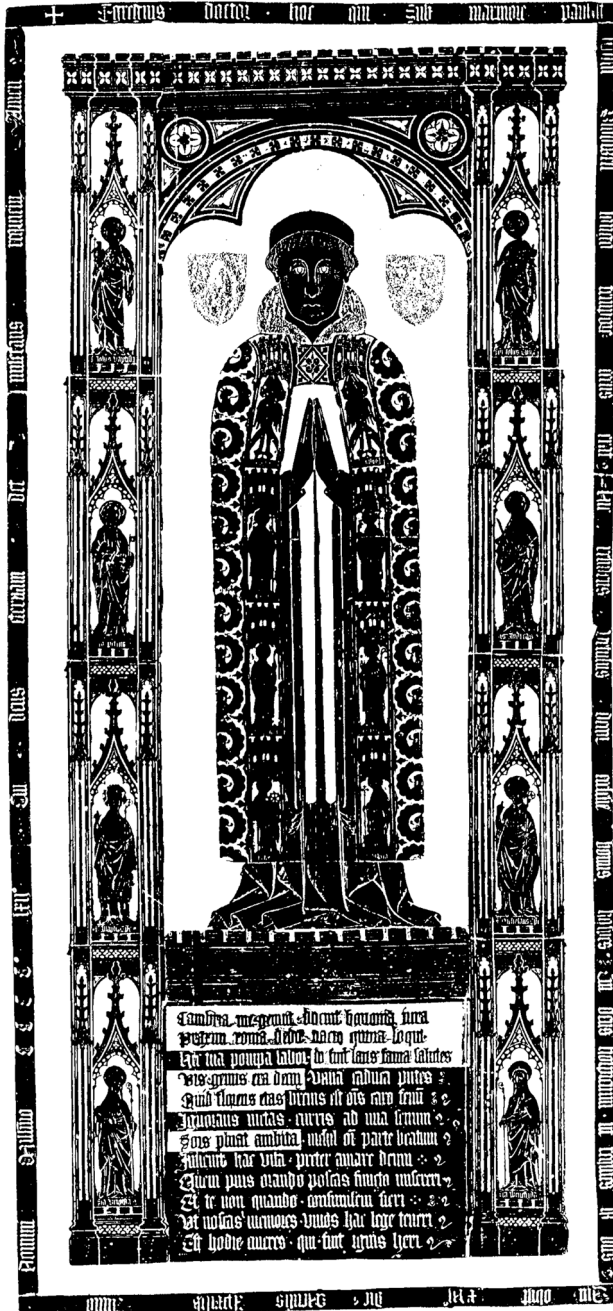


Fig. 4: John Blodwell's Brass entire, rubbing and photo Martin Stuchfield.

Description³

The monument consists of separate brass elements laid into a dark marble slab.

Overall measurements: 271,2 x 125 cm.

Blodwell stands, splendidly attired in a rich processional cope, which falls open and is held under his throat by an ornamented morse. On his head is the pileus, the academic's cap, and on either side is a shield of lead, so worn away as to be illegible. Macalister blazons:

Dexter: "Gules a lion rampant within a bordure engrailed argent [William Grey, Bishop of Ely (1454-78)]"; sinister: "Party per pale argent and gules a lion rampant countercharged [Blodwell]".⁴

Blodwell wears a processional cope strewn with heraldic badges: langued lion's heads issuant from exteriorially invecked borders of voided roundels. They recall at the same time his and Bishop Grey's arms.

The orphreys are decorated with saints under Gothic, embattled canopies, standing in four tiers on each side, all linked with Blodwell's life. Uppermost are the archangels Michael and Gabriel. Blodwell's birthplace is dedicated to St. Michael, whereas Gabriel, God's messenger, may point to Blodwell in his function concerned with papal correspondence. Both are depicted as six-winged seraphim, which seems a homage to John Sleaford, his predecessor in office, on whose brass there are also seraphim. Next are two archbishops, each holding his doubly-crossed staff: possibly SS. David and John of Beverley. David was the founder of the church in Wales, Blodwell's home country, and he held a prebend at the cathedral, while John of Beverley was venerated by the disabled, and Blodwell, in his blindness, may have felt drawn to him. (Neither of them really was an archbishop in his life.) Below come two bishops, SS. Thomas Canteloupe, bishop of Hereford (1275-82) and Chad, of Lichfield, both remembered for Blodwell's canonries at those two sees. Lowest are

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- 3 Lack, W. / Stuchfield, H.M. / Whittemore P., *The Monumental Brasses of Cambridgeshire* („County Series“), London 1995, p. 4.; Lamp, Reinhard, *Das Antlitz im Boden, Katalog einer Ausstellung von Abriegen, Lübeck 2006*, cat. nr. 19, p. 84-88.
- 4 R.A.S. Macalister et alii, *The Brasses of Cambridgeshire in: Monumental Brass Society, TRANSACTIONS, 1896*, vol. II, part 7, pp. 239-40.

SS. Katherine and Margaret, perhaps the most popular female saints in the Middle Ages.



Fig. 5: Upper part of the brass, photo Kevin Herring.

The priest wears the *almuce*, whose lappets are recessed and were inlaid in lead in order to suggest fur, and under the cope a wide-sleeved alb, which is laid in folds over his feet, in a formalized manner.

The figure stands on an embattled base, within a complex canopy, under a depressed round arch, which is cusped and spandrelled and supports an embattlement. The side-shafts are filled with canopied saints. Uppermost are the two Saints John the Baptist with the lamb and the pen-holding Evangelist, with his poisoned, dragon-infested chalice, Blodwell's two namesakes. One tier below are the two Apostles: Peter (holding his key), who harks back to Blodwell's papal connection, and Andrew, who without his saltire cross would not have been identified had he not had his name engraved under his feet. He is the patron saint of Wells cathedral – pointing to Blodwell's canonry. Next are two bishops, St. Asaph (Blodwell had been Dean at St. Asaph's), and St. Nicholas, one of the most

popular saints, but there is also Blodwell's connection to Pope Nicholas V (enthroned in 1447). Lowest are (again, as on the orphreys) two female saints: Brigid and Winifred, recalling Blodwell's Welsh background. St. Brigid (c. 450-523) established the church in Ireland, and founded the first community of nuns in Ireland. St. Winifred, a 7th-century saint, is particularly associated with Holywell, not far from St. Asaph.⁵

The choice of saints on the side-shafts and orphreys that are so relevant for Blodwell's life-story is an echo of Sleaford's memorial, in the same way as here also appear six-winged seraphim.

Underneath the figure is again an embattled base. Below this and between the side-shafts is a plate filled with a foot-inscription. There is



Fig 6: Lower part, with foot-inscription, photo Kevin Herring.

5 All this information on the identification and function of the saints in Blodwell's brass is from Girard, John Blodwell, Rector of Balsham, Monumental Brass Society, Transactions 1993, vol. XV, part 2, pp.134-136, and the MBS 'County Series': W. Lack, H.M. Stuchfield & P. Whittemore, The Monumental Brasses of Cambridgeshire, London, Monumental Brass Society, p. 4.

no further base at the bottom. All around the monument runs a separate marginal text, both texts are Latin verse.

This plate is reddish, contains more copper, whereas the effigy is of a noticeably lighter colour, more yellowish, than the canopy-work and text-fillets, the alloy evidently containing more zinc. When one considers that the figure's recessed parts were filled with the greyish lead for the almuces and shields, one cannot but realize that colour-effects were sought.

The figure's frontal stance and arrangement of clothes is demonstratively static and symmetrical. There is no fold in the cope, the badges are arranged in a straight line, in repetitive order, the opening of the cope continues unnaturally into the folds of the alb, which then falls in parallel lines of axial symmetry over his feet. The praying hands touch exactly between the almuces-lappets – there is nothing in the figure that shows any movement. The overall effect is mechanical and lifeless.

In contrast to the main figure, the saints in the orphreys and canopy-shafts still have the appealing Gothic swing in their stance and rich folds in their clothes. Also their ogee canopies follow the old style, while the central canopy is round-arched. The composition is therefore not homogeneous, but seems transitional. One feels the end of the Middle Ages is coming, or has indeed come.

Inscriptions

A) Marginal Text

The marginal text is in *textura*, delicately and clearly incised but for the sometimes indistinct minims of 'u', 'n', 'm', 'i' (irregularly dotted). Verse separators also appear irregularly. The 'e', however, is always carefully engraved, never a 'c', which shows great care was taken in the execution. Capital letters are used for verse-beginnings, personal names, and date-words – with the (incomprehensible) exception: Sub. There are only two abbreviations – in the usual places.

Text

lines

top	a)	Egregius doctor · hoc qui Sub marmore pausat
right hand	b)	Johu Blodwell longo tempore cecus erat § Hic residens vetulus decor ecclesie bonus hospes § Cui deus hospicium · fit requies qz dies
bottom	c)	Qui obiit xvi die Mensis Aprilis Anno
left hand	d)	Domini Millesimo CCCC lxx Cui deus eternam det miserans requiem Amen

Clear Text

Lines arranged according to versification. Appropriate punctuation added.

- 1 Egregius doctor, hoc qui sub marmore pausat,
- 2 Johannes Blodwell, longo tempore cecus erat,
- 3 hic residens. Vetulus decor ecclesie, bonus hospes.
- 4 Cui deus hospicium fit, requiesque, dies.
- 5 Qui obiit xvi^o die Mensis Aprilis
- 6 Anno Domini Millesimo CCCC lxx^o.
- 7 Cui deus eternam det miserans requiem! Amen.

Translation

- 1 The eminent doctor who pauses under this marble stone,
 2 John Blodwell, was blind for a long time
 3 while residing here. The gentle old man was an ornament
 of the Church, and a good host.
 4 May God now be his hospitable home, his rest, his daylight.
 5 He died on the 16th day of the month of April
 6 In the year of our Lord one thousand four hundred and sixty-two.
 7 God in His mercy give him eternal peace. Amen.

Comment

- 3 *vetulus*: normally means "rather old", but it can also be a term of intimacy, of endearment, which here seems to be intended.

Stylistic Appreciation

The text is made up of seven lines of Latin verse, which scan, most of the time, but only if one reads the abbreviations and ciphers elastically, i.e. sometimes expanded, at other times not. Thus, the verse-pairs 1/2 and 3/4 are true distichs, provided that in v. 2 John be read without the expletion. These two distichs filling the top and right-hand margins constitute a coherent unit ending with the theologically essential intercessory prayer.

But the prosody of line c) miscarries completely. As it takes up the bottom-fillet of the margin, it looks like one complete verse, but it scans neither by hexameter- nor by pentameter-rules. The last word, Anno, evidently does not belong into that verse at all, but must be seen as the opening word of the following line d), on the left-hand fillet.

V. 5 (now minus Anno) can be said to scan as a hexameter, if the cipher is read as words. After this verse, one would now expect a pentameter, but there is only the unruly date-line of v. 6, which will not fit prosody. But v. 7 is again a correct pentameter.

As there is such prosodic disorder in lines 4 and 5, ought one perhaps assess them as being not verse after all, but prose inlays within verse-lines? The phenomenon would be exceptional. Also, the metrically cor-

rect v. 4, a pentameter, would juxt another pentameter in the last line, and that, too, is unconvincing.

It seems then that one must accept the inscription as verse entirely. But no matter how one would scan the crooked v. 6, and try to force it into shape either as a hexameter or as a pentameter, there would still be two consecutive verses of the same kind, together with either the preceding or the following verse, i.e. either two hexameters or two pentameters running, and that is simply not done.

Which leaves us confronted with the inescapable fact that this poem has only seven verse-lines, but distichs are verse-pairs, and must come in even numbers. Also an epitaph of this kind made up of distichs, two consecutive verses of the same kind may be considered a most conspicuous irregularity in the composition, and out of keeping with the correct versification in the remainder of the poem, and has us wondering. However, one must remember that the blatant deficiency in the versification at such an important spot is in all likelihood not imputable to the author.

A suggestion as to how this riddle may be solved, and how v. 6 may be scanned, of sorts, is advanced later, in the section given over to "investigation".

The poet fares much better, though, in another respect, namely his lexicon. His choice of words is very interesting.

There is a cluster of expressions concerning the notion of "time." Quite apart from the evident information on the date of death, there are several words conveying the idea of "sojourning", on the one hand as a transitory state of being: *longo tempore* (v. 2), and *pausat* (v. 1), which means "rest here (for a while)" and points at the prospective resurrection. And secondly, the sense of "abiding" as permanent condition: *residens* (v. 3), *in eternam* and in the notion of "peace": twice we have *requies* (vv. 4 and 7).

In a way, the contrastive pair *hospes* (v. 3) and *hospitium* (v. 4) also belongs into this semantic field of "sojourn". *Hospes* means "the host, someone who entertains his guests", and *hospitium* is "the action of hosting", but also the "house sheltering guests, travellers, a hostel". Here also, we have first the aspect of a transitory function, and then the permanent fixation of the soul in God's eternity. Both meanings appear here in contrastive union.

A very particular instance of the image of "time" is *dies* (v. 4), "the day". At first one is baffled to find this word in a context where it does not seem to make sense. But *dies* also means "daylight", and one realizes that this is a reflection on Blodwell's blindness. Furthermore, the word expresses the hope that his soul may see God, now that he is in the spiritual world. These meanings are interwoven with yet another one: *dies* can mean "a date for an appointment", here of course Blodwell's hoped-for encounter with God. There is even a fourth sense in which the word is used. In a legal context – Blodwell was well versed in both laws – *dies* is "the day for appearance in court", and this now points to the Day of Judgment, the *dies iræ*, *dies illa*, the poet hoping that God may be with Blodwell's soul in that fearful moment.

The word, therefore, sparkles in many colours, and is the notional and poetic pivot of the poem, concentrating in itself, as it does, both Blodwell's physical condition and his soul's aim, in a theological context.

Investigation

The obvious prosodic deficiency in vv. 5 and 6, which is not concordant with the linguistic quality of the poem, calls for an investigation. It is now most entertaining, and rewarding, to imagine how this disorder came about.

We may assume that the author had submitted his hand-written original text with a correctly arranged and written bottom fillet, line c), ending on *Aprilis*, and had begun the next verse by *Anno*, where of rights it ought to be. And why the engraver added the supernumerary *Anno* to the bottom fillet is the first question that needs to be dealt with.

If he had spelt out the cipher in words, instead of putting down the bare figure, if therefore he had written *sexto decimo* instead of *XVI*^o, he would have had matter enough to fill his line just nicely. Therefore, it is more than likely that that is what the author had intended him to do. He had probably submitted the words in his autograph, but perhaps the engraver had been absent-minded for a moment, for any reason which lies beyond conjecture, and so cut the cipher instead. Anyhow, here is the core of the ensuing chaos.

In order to fathom this mystery we must allow our imagination to run free, and visualize the scene.

Soon after finishing his verse 5 the engraver must have realized his mistake, and it must have come to him as a shock, because now there was so much empty space staring at him in that bottom-line c). He absolutely needed something to flesh it a little more in order to save appearances.

By now he must have been flustered. When he turned back to the autograph to see where and how he had gone wrong, and to look up the next word, his eye fastened on the word *Anno* (the reason why that may have happened will occupy us shortly), so he filled that in, confident that he would be able to make up for the loss of script in the next fillet d) by spreading his text.

The next word, *domini*, came as a windfall, and the engraver looked up in hope. It is unusual to find it spelt out in its entirety in a date-line, inscriptions regularly having an abbreviated form here, namely *Dni*. The full word appears only in texts such as prayers or encomiums, so that one may assume that the author had not written it out fully and that his manuscript had *diii*. The engraver therefore had material here for lengthening his script just when he most needed it, and he spelt it out fully, against the author's direction. He was able thereby to fill space in v. 6.

If such is sound reasoning, then one could reconstruct a hexameter-line for v. 6, reading the abbreviations elastically:

v. 6: **An no / Dom⁶ mill / mo // ce / ce ce / c'el ex se / cun do**

The line makes even quite good prosody.⁷ Date-lines are really awkward to manage, if at all. Indulgence is therefore called for: the author may have intended it so.

6 If our conjecture appears sound, it would mean the poet had written his manuscript in *textura*, where the minims of small letters all look alike. His hand-writing seems not to have been trustworthy enough. The 'o' in *dom* would appear as a result of pronunciation.

7 'L', pronounced [el], is preceded by *ce*, therefore there is elision: [c'el]. It is followed by X, but that is not in function of a single consonant, but is to be pronounced [eks], and therefore [c'el] is not in the position of a long syllable, so the prosody

Unhappily, it is not what the engraver cut. Instead, he thought he could yet cover up his mistake. He thought there were two verses still in store for him for his fourth fillet, minus the word *Anno*, and he was confident that he would have material to fill the dexter margin, leaving just that little more room between the words.

But then he did not know that something more had gone wrong, gone very wrong, at the same time. And this soon afterwards was brought home to him sharply. We know that because already the first word after *domini*, and all other subsequently engraved words on the fourth margin, fillet d), are set much wider apart than are the words on the first two fillets. This shows that, after having cut *Domini*, the engraver must have understood that, contrary to his expectations, there was now space to be filled for three verses, but he had copy for only two left over for him, so that he would have to stretch his remaining text much further than he had foreseen.

Therefore, after writing *Anno* and then *Domini*, and before continuing, he must have realized that he had made not one mistake, but two, and this time a truly monumental one: in his agitation, he had skipped a whole verse of the poem.

In this emergency he decided that, rather than throw the wax-bands away – it would cost time, his reputation, he risked his job – he would go the whole length and pretend there were only seven verses in all, trusting that nobody would notice.

In which assumption he was not far wrong, because this defect seems to have escaped notice or not disturbed experts so far.

But there it is: the poem is one whole verse short.

Two errors are therefore compounded here, at the very same spot. If only what he had written at the end of the bottom fillet had really been the first word of this unknown verse, instead of *Anno*, the worst might yet have been avoided. But he had written *Anno*. What may have caused him to commit this mistake is the next question, which invites, indeed presses for, speculation.

is safe. Neither is [eks] to be considered a long syllable, even though it is followed by another consonant, in *secundo*. But the two words together are pronounced [exe], the x together with s melting into just one consonant x. Delicate handling, but brilliant.

One explanation might be that, after having written v. 5, with its last word *Anno* containing the first part of the date of death, the engraver, when next looking at his author's manuscript, had automatically sought the continuation of this time-information, and had followed up his text to fill his line with the word which continues the date of death. That made sense, and the engraver cannot have suspected his error for some time yet.

There was a second reason, which opened a really gaping trap for the engraver.

Why, and when, does one skip a line?

Who has not yet experienced, when reading, dictating, or copying a text, that they have omitted a whole line because that began with the same group of letters or figures as the next one. The author's manuscript will in all likelihood have been written in verse-form. One may therefore imagine the missing verse [5x] to have had the same line-beginning as v. 6 – not necessarily with the identical word, not blandly repeating *Anno*, but with its first letters, *Ann...* or *An...*, or even just *A...* Seeing these, the engraver would have been shunted onto the wrong line because that seemed to begin with the date-word.

It is interesting now to conjecture what this lost verse [5x] would have contained. Possibly there was some mention of the bereaved parish in it, or of Blodwell's state of mind, or of his suffering, because these elements are missing in the text.

And this missing verse must be located as coming after v. 5, because it ought to have been a pentameter, separating one hexameter (v. 5, ending *Aprilis*), from the next hexameter of v. 6. This verse, however, to make matters more difficult, and the trap for the engraver more treacherous, comes wedged in between the two date-lines, which form a notional unit.

When one considers what syntactical shape it would have had, one realizes that it cannot have been an independent sentence, but must have come as an interpolated line, as a parenthesis, an intercalation, something that halts this block of information for a short spell only, but does not disrupt it, and allows the syntactical flow to continue afterwards unmolested. A complete and independent phrase is therefore excluded;

its syntactical structure must be in concord with, and subservient to, the preceding main clause. Therefore, it must be built around a participle or participles linked to the subject.

On these grounds we seem to be able to make the following suppositions about the missing verse:

- 1) The outline of the contents appears dimly drawn.
- 2) The metric form must be a pentameter.
- 3) The syntactical form must be a participle-structure.
- 4) Possibly the first word can be found. It will probably have started out on "Ann..." or "An..."
- 5) The last syllable must end on *-is*, so as to rhyme with *Aprilis*, for the line to be integrated into the general scheme of end-rhymes, which obtains in the first two verse-pairs but is then unreasonably abandoned in the existing text.

All in all, there is amazingly much from which to attempt a reconstruction of the missing line. It is fascinating now to try for a reconstitution on this basis.

Author's conjecture fulfils all these requirements:

[5x – Annixus sacris, planctus in orbe nimis –]

"– Having striven for holy things, and entrusted himself to the sacraments, and being very much lamented in his world – "

Some comments are needed here.

anniti, or adniti, can mean "to strive for", but also "to lean against", thus, figuratively, "to rely on something". Perhaps both meanings ought to be contained in the translation.

sacra means "all things holy", *sacrum* among many things pertaining to religion, can mean "a sacrament".

orbis is "a circle", "the world", figuratively "the orbit in which he moved".

nimis "very much".

Here is then how this verse would fit in between the vv. 5 and 6 with respect to the rhyme-scheme. Arrows and colours underline the relations:

5	↓↔	Qui obiit sexto	↔	decimo die Mensis Aprilis ↓
[5x ↓		- Annixus sacris,	↔↔	planctus in orbe nimis - ↑]
6	↑↔	Anno Dom[ini] mill(esi)mo	↔↔	C C C C L X secundo

The rhyme-diagram now shows a fine axial symmetry within these three lines, with leonine and internal rhymes, so that order is restored in the versification. In prosody, the verses read:

5	Qui ob i / it sex / to	//	de ci / mo dje / Men sis A / pri lis
[5x	- An ni / xus sa / cris ,	//	planc tus in / or be ni mis -]
6	An no / Dom mill / mo	//	ce / ce ce / c' el ex se / cun do.

The poem would thus be complete and correct.

If the engraver had not written *XVI*^o instead of *sexto decimo*, and if he had picked on the correct first word of v. 5x, there would not have been the ensuing chaos.

B) Foot-Inscription

Script

The plate containing the foot-inscription is of particular interest in that it is treated in counterchanged technique. The script (textura) is raised in the passages where Blodwell's soul speaks, and those parts given to a Second Voice are incised. Hemistichs are marked with mid-line stops, line-ends (of the incised parts) with flourishes. The 'i' is again irregularly dotted. There are only few abbreviations. Also this text is remarkably well engraved, and (with the exception of one letter, where indistinctness was intentional) is clearly legible. In itself, the script – of the whole brass – deserves mention as a fine piece of workmanship.

The plate was intended to fit into the space between the side-shafts, but the workman who came with it to place it there had to cut away a

sliver off the left-hand shaft, and correspondingly left an open interstice on the right-hand side, because the measurements did not marry.

The two texts seem to have been cut by different hands, for the letter 'd' in the foot-inscription has (with one exception only) a characteristic swirl at the top, whereas the 'd' in the marginal text has a straight end or a different swirl. Raised script demands a particularly high competence and will have been given the workshop's specialist.

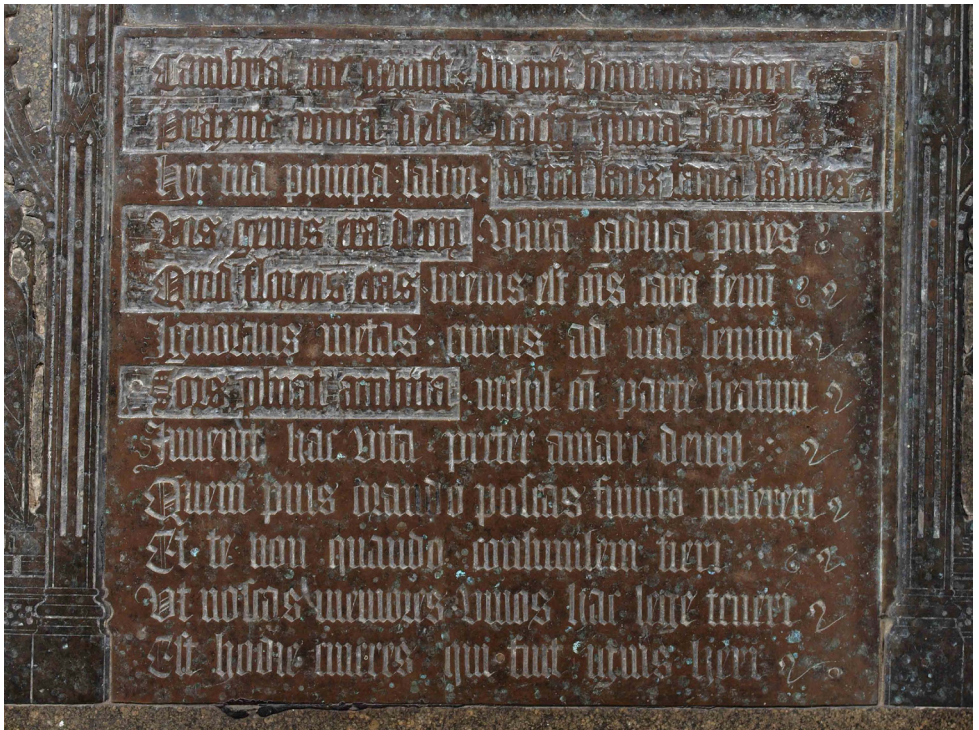


Fig 7: Foot-inscription, photo Martin Stuchfield.

Text

Legend:	Is in the inscription:
t'	a "t" with a barb jutting down for -tur from under the cross-bar
black script	text in raised letters
script white on black	text incised

1 Cambria me genuit · docuit bononia iura
 2 Praxim roma dedit · nacio quina loqui
 3 Hec tua pompa labor · do sint laus fama salutes
 4 Vis genus era decor · vana caduca putes §
 5 Quid florens etas · brevis est ois caro fenu §
 6 Ignorans metas · curris ad ima fenuu §
 7 Sors pluat ambita · nichil oi parte beatuum
 8 Invenit hac vita · preter amare deum §
 9 Quem pius orando poscas functo misereri §
 10 Et te non quando · consimilem fieri §
 11 Ut noscas memores · viuos hac lege teneri §
 12 Est hodie ciueres · qui fuit ignis heri §

Clear Text

Punctuation added, abbreviations expleted.

1 Cambria me genuit, docuit Bononia iura,
 2 Praxim Roma dedit nacio quina loqui.
 3 Hec tua pompa labor! D[e]o fint laus, fama, falutes,
 4 Vis, genus, era, decor! Vana caduca putes!
 5 Quid florens etas?! Brevis est o(mn)is caro fenu(m).
 6 Ignorans metas curris ad ima fenum!
 7 Sors pluat ambita?! Ni[/]hil o(mn)i parte beatum

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8 Invenit[ur] hac vita, preter amare deum.
 9 Quem pius orando potestas functo misereri,
 10 Et te non quando confirmilem fieri.
 11 Ut potestas memores vivos hac lege teneri:
 12 Est hodie cineres, qui fuit ignis heri!

Übersetzung

1 Wales gave me birth, Bologna taught me the Laws;
 2 Rome provided the practice, and the competence, to speak five
 languages, as if I were so many nations in one.
 3 This outward show of yours is laborious, unconvincing.
 To God may be ascribed a person's esteem, glory, welfare,
 4 Strength, origin, wealth, and honour.
 Account all these things vain and ephemeral!
 5 So is there no meaning in a flourishing life-time?
 Short-lived is all flesh – it is hay.
 6 You ignore the destination of old age, and thus career down
 to your perdition.
 7 May perhaps destiny rain down upon a man, and come as a gift,
 even though he had striven for the very thing?
 By no means can blessed happiness in all respects
 8 Be found in this life except in loving God.
 9 Him you should beg, in your prayers, as you are a pious person,
 that he be merciful to the dead man,
 10 And that you may not at some point in time become like him.
 11 May you realize, and remember, that the living are held
 under this one law:
 12 He is ashes today, who was fire yesterday.

Comment

1 *Cambria me genuit* ... This is an echo to a famous Latin poem, which
 Vergil is said to have composed for his own epitaph:
*Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc
 Parthenope. Cecini pascua, rura, duces.*

It says: "Mantua gave me birth, the Calabrians then tore me away, and now holds me Naples. I made poems about pastoral themes, rural subjects, about leaders of armies."⁸

The association of Blodwell's verse with his model is most intense. He also begins with his birthplace, using the same construction, the same wording, then saying where he went later. The first line thus closely hugs its mould, and also the accounting of his work reminds us of Vergil's poem. Yet further similarities are the facts that this is also composed in distichs, and is also an epitaph.

2 *praxim*

has a twofold syntactical function. In thought it is linked with *iura*, therefore means "Rome provided the practice in Law", but it also governs *loqui*, and says "the practice of speaking".

2 *natio quina*

In classical poetic Latin, *quini* means "five of each", and ought to go with a plural noun. In the Middle Ages much liberty was taken with the formation of figures. Here the expression probably is a predicative linked to the speaker, meaning "I learnt to speak as five nations in one, as a five-fold nation", and is to underline Blodwell's faculty of speaking five languages, perhaps even hinting at his being able to speak them like his mother-tongue.

8 *cecini* means "I have sung". Pastoral, rural and military themes are the object of Vergil's various works. Vergil died shortly after landing on the Calabrian coast, and was buried in Naples – *Parthenope* is an old word for Naples. Information about this poem is to be found in Vergil's biography, *Vita Vergilii*, by Donatus. This precious revelation is gratefully received from my friend and former colleague Hans Peter Blecken.

- At any rate, the line points to the multinational hub, seething with earnest good-will, great artistic achievement, high learning, but also crafty diplomatic activity, long-term papal power-politics, violence and personal intrigue, that Rome was in the Middle Ages, and lights up Blodwell's presence in the centre of it all there, as registrar and mediator in the Vatican's international correspondence.
- 3 *labor* is "work, effort, hardship", but here it would seem to mean "something laborious", which may be interpreted as "far-fetched, and therefore unconvincing".
- 3 *Do* is here understood as contraction of *Deo*, for prosodic reasons, in analogy to other forms without the 'e': *di* for *dei*, *dis* for *deis*. *Deo sint laus* etc is literally "may a person's esteem etc belong to God", meaning "Let it be acknowledged and made known that all earthly glory stems from God." The ancients spoke of "the Gods", the poet left the pagan tradition behind and transferred the idea to the one Christian God.
- 5 *fenum* There is also the spelling *fænum*.
- 5 *omnis caro fenum* is a quotation from the Bible (I Petri 1,24): *quia omnis caro ut fænum*, "since all flesh is like hay" (meaning grass ready for mowing).
- 6 *senum* is a genitive plural, of *senex*, "old man", to be seen as linked to *metas*, saying "the destination-line of old men".
- 6 *ima* means "the greatest downfall", or even "the underworld", i.e. "Hell".

- 7 *ambita*⁹ is an interesting, but difficult case. The present translation sees it as a nominative, an attribute to sors, meaning that “destiny may rain down as a thing striven for”, that is to say “come as a gift of God, although a man had worked for this very destiny to happen”.
- 7 *Nihil* here means “by no means”.
- 7 *beatum* is from the verb *beare*, “render happy”, *beatus* then means “rendered happy”, but *beatum* is here to be taken as an abstract noun, meaning “happiness”. In the Christian connotation, however, it is also “blessedness”. The translation had better contain both meanings.
- 7 *Nihil omni parte beatum* is a classical quotation taken from Horace, *Carmina* II, 16, 7th stanza, which runs:
Lætus in præsens animus quod ultra est
Oderit curare et amara lento
Temperet risu: nihil est ab omni
Parte beatum.
 “A soul happily turned towards the present may spurn to care much about what lies beyond, and with a slow, long-drawn laughter may temper any bitterness: in no way can perfect happiness be.”
 Our poet, then, has adapted the classical model, giving the lines of this pagan, hedonistic, materialist, and pessimistic author a deeper, a Christian sense.
- 8 *invenit* contains the only somewhat indistinct lettering in the text. From the bottom of the letter ‘t’ a broad curve rises upwards to roughly half the height of a minim. Also, a line drops from the quillon of the letter ‘t’ to meet it.

9 There are only few divergences from the classical metric system: thus in *ambita* the last syllable should not be in position of a long syllable. However, we here see analogy to the handling of the verse-end as to quantities. Caesura-freedom is claimed.

This ought to be interpreted as the mark of an abbreviation, which allows its expansion as the passive verb-ending, so that it can be seen as meaning *invenitur*, “is to be found”. For prosodic reasons, however, it must not be so pronounced, which is evidently why the author resorted to this stratagem. Without this interpretation, the whole sentence would be unintelligible.¹⁰



Fig. 8: *Invenit*,
photo
M. Stuchfield.

10 *quando*

is possibly *aliquando*, “at some point in time”. The phrase then could reflect on Blodwell’s calamity – his blindness must have distressed him greatly. The following *ut*-clause is then to be seen as a wishful imperative: “Oh, may you realize ...”.

11 *memores*

is to be seen as a subjunctive verb-form, in a parallel to *noscas*, meaning “may you remember”.

10 Martin Stuchfield’s rubbing has proved the most reliable.

Stylistic Appreciation

This poem is made up of six distichs scanning particularly well, which is quite rare in medieval Latin verse.

Much also is to be said about the rhyme-system. The following text-diagram shows up *cæsurae* and rhymes by means of arrows and colour.

1		Cambria me genuit,	↔↔↔	docuit Bononia iura;	
2		Praxim Roma dedit		natio quina loqui.	
3	↓	Hæc tua pompa labor!		Deo sint laus, fama, salutes,	↓
4	↑	Vis, genus, æra, decor!	↔↔↔	Vana caduca putes!	↑
5	↓	Quid florens ætas?!		Brevis est omnis caro – fenum.	↓↓
6	↑	Ignorans metas		curris ad ima senum.	↑↑
7	↓	Sors pluat ambita!?		Nihil omni parte beatum.	↓
8	↑	Invenit(ur) hac vita		præter amare deum.	↑
9	↓	Quem pius orando		poscas functo misereri,	↓
10	↑	Et te non quando		consimilem fieri.	↑
11	↓	Ut noscas memores		vivos hac lege teneri:	↓
12	↑	Est hodie cineres		qui fuit ignis heri.	↑

The first hexameter has an interesting internal rhyme, which links the two words on either side of the *cæsura*, *genuit* / *docuit* – quite an exceptional arrangement, which, together with the chiasmic syntax of the two sentences, the verbs facing each other in axial symmetry, gives the beginning of the poem a resounding effect.

From V. 3 on, the distichs are bound together by end-rhymes and also by (different) *cæsura*-rhymes, sometimes even rich dissyllabic rhymes.

From then on the verses have rich dissyllabic rhymes at hemistich-ends and verse-ends. The poem really has impressive versification.

But it has more qualities.

For one, it is remarkable for its significant system of imagery, not only as regards the choice, but also its composition.

The first image is "the plant". It appears in v. 5, with *florens ætas*, the "flowering life", and immediately elicits the Second Voice's warning response of the "dried and reaped grass" in *fenum*, the dead plant opposed to the living. The realization that there is the contrastive pairing of this image brings to mind that there has already been this notion of "falling

and dying”, namely embodied in *caduca* (v. 4), which means “prone to fall”, hence “transitory”, such as falling leaves.

This is the first instance of the poem’s notional structure as antithesis between Life and Death.

The second time that such opposition materializes occurs in v. 6. Here, *meta* is contrasted with *ima*. The *metas* are the two winning-posts in the Roman arena which must be rounded several times and then mark the end of a chariot-race. It calls forth the idea of racing in *curris* – here not to victory, though, but towards the end of life, or possibly to Hell. Movement, an essential element, even a definition, of life, embodied in both these terms, is thus opposed to *ima*, “the abyss, the lowest point”, that is, death.

The rain, in *pluat* (v. 7), must be seen as the fulfiller of hope, the giver of life. This image supports the prevalent system, its counterpart being the dryness of the grass in v. 5, where it symbolizes Death.

In the last pentameter *ignis* “the living fire”, confronts *cineres* “the cold ashes”.

This system of images sets Life against Death, and that is precisely one of the central ideas that inform this text. The notional edifice of the poem is therefore most meaningfully underpinned by a parallel system of poetic language. Such congruity between the message and the linguistic form of a text is a touchstone of great literature.

Another asset of the poem is its style. Wording and syntax are characterized by a striking succinctness, by unmitigated harshness. This is seen most clearly in vv. 3, 5, and 7, where sometimes the verbs even are missing, and where no adjectives or adverbs facilitate the understanding and smooth the grating diction. The reader is called upon to bring to bear his own intelligence and sensitivity on the task of decoding the meaning.

Through such stylistic compression, a great wealth of thought is compacted into the poem, as instanced particularly in the extremely short phrase *Sors pluat ambita* (v. 7), which needs intensive commenting for the sense to be unravelled.

The design of this poem as a dialogue is an essential element of the form. The voice of Blodwell’s soul is trying again and again to justify it-

self, arguing a successful life, and the Second Voice in reply belittles his achievements and warns him against possible perdition.

The quantitative distribution of both antagonists is uneven. Blodwell fills the lines at the beginning, but the Second Voice takes up more and more room, gaining ground inexorably as the poem proceeds, and silences Blodwell's voice long before the end.

This arrangement runs parallel to the poem's antithetical notional structure. To underline this, the two partners of dialogue are most conspicuously, and judicially, set off by being carved each in a different technique, Blodwell's part coming in raised letters, the Second Voice having incised text. (The alternating technique of raised and incised lettering in the brass of John Rudyng in Biggleswade is not another example, because it does not have any dramaturgical function.)

It is interesting, and worthwhile, to reflect upon who this second speaker in our present poem is. Opinions and suggestions vary.

There is the interpretation that Blodwell is pitted against Death, but the Second Voice cannot represent Death, rather the contrary, because it warns him against superficiality in life, against Death in Life, and especially in the latter half gives spiritual guidance, in the face of the finiteness of all living things. Sometimes the Voice sounds like Ecclesiastes crying out *Vanitas vanitatum! Omnia vanitas!* (Eccl., 2), and then again like the Apostle Peter, when he warns that "all flesh is as grass" (*quia omnis caro ut fœnum*, I Peter, 1,24) – realizations that are only too true, and understood by all.

One might be led to see in the Second Voice Blodwell himself, the personification of his Conscience, his Better Insight. But on closer scrutiny one wonders. It is true that the Voice addresses Blodwell directly in v. 3 (*tua pompa, curris, putes*). After that, though, the Second Voice generalizes. And when it again uses the 2nd person singular in *Quem ... poscas functo misereri* (v. 9), "May you implore Him to have mercy on the dead man" intercession is being sought at the hands of the passerby. It follows, then, that the Voice is now addressing the visitor of the tomb, the reader of the text, or quite generally anyone, humanity as a whole, warning us all against a futile, shallow life.

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After this realization, one instinctively re-reads the text, and finds that, even when the Voice was to all appearances addressing Blodwell directly, its words were already directed at us all.

Is it God speaking here then? From the unmitigated reproaches levelled at Balsham one might come to that conclusion. But that is not the solution, either, because the Voice advises him (us) to love God.

But was our earlier identification of the Second Voice as Blodwell's Conscience then entirely wrong? Not so. For it is the Spirit that spoke to Blodwell in, and through, his conscience then, as it speaks to us now, strengthening our own consciences, and giving us the essential life-line guidance. "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities," says Paul (Romans 9, 26).

How delicate of the poet, how wise, not to have thickly given the Second Voice a name, an identification. No such facile labelling here. And thus we are left to our own devices, are now given the chance to find our covert path and to come to a healing recognition.

This really is the hub of the poem, the intellectual pivot around which revolves the message.

To sum it up, this poem is not only a marvel of Latin versification. It is also impressive in the precision and beauty of its imagery, in its powerful dramatic structure, and memorable in its wisdom.

It is without a doubt a masterpiece, the work of a great mind and a great poet.

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And I do particular homage to Revd. Girard, one-time rector of Holy Trinity of Balsham, for his work and life.

And thereby hangs a tale.

In 1992 I first came to Balsham on one of my cycling-tours. The rector there very kindly and unhesitatingly gave me permission to make a rubbing in his church and handed me what notes he had on the brasses. When he realized I was a German, he opened himself up to me, talked about his life, his origins, his family some of whose members had fought in the War for Germany, others on the Allied side. I was much taken by him.

After the Sunday service was over I finally was able to begin working on the Sleaford brass. It was mid-October, and not warm any more. In order to keep the cold and damp of the church out, the rector had seen to it that all windows were shut and drawn the big brown-red velvet chancel-curtains behind me. When after some hours the autumn light started to fade, I had the lights on. The redbreast had stopped singing in the churchyard. I was all alone. The great house was absolutely still, there was not a sound whenever I stopped rubbing to sit up and relieve my back. I was conscious of that velvet curtain hiding the huge, cold, dark, empty nave behind me.

And once, when I looked at it, I suddenly realized it was moving, ever so slightly, but distinctly, swaying back into the nave, and then in again, towards the chancel, towards me. Then noiselessly it sagged back.

Had I been breathed at?

When I had finished my work, left the church and slipped the key in the vicar's letter-box. I was glad to be out in the crisp night-air.

In May 2004 I was back in Balsham, again on my bicycle, to rub both brasses. But the Revd. Girard had retired and left. And there was nothing in the church to remind the visitor of his former presence there. On this occasion I had given myself enough time. And I needed it, too, for the colour-technique that I employ. The priest's cope I did in rich dark burgundy purple, the colour of the velvet chancel-curtain.¹¹

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11 The curtain no longer is there, has been replaced by glazing and a pair of narrower side-curtains of different colours.



Fig. 9 The tower of Holy trinity, photo K. Herring.