

# Wymond de Brandon: An Ecclesiastical Official of the Late Thirteenth Century

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## SUMMARY

*The chance discovery near Cholsey in 2012 of the seal of Wymond de Brandon has prompted a speculative account of his career and activities. That account forms the first part of this paper, by Nigel Ramsay. The seal itself, a silver matrix with Wymond's name and, at its centre, a portrait head based upon an antique prototype, is discussed by Martin Henig in the second part. The seal was found by a metal-detectorist at approximately NGR SU 5784 and is recorded on the Portable Antiquities Scheme data base as PAS-657877. The object has been acquired by the Oxfordshire Museum Service (accession number 2014.165).*

Wymond de Brandon is at present known only from three pieces of evidence: two documents in which he is mentioned, and his newly discovered seal (Figs. 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> One of these documents is of fairly minor significance: it is a charter that is dateless and of uncertain context. Wymond makes his appearance in this charter merely as one of seven witnesses to the sale of a piece of land in 'Scopwyk' by William de Marisco to John de Mouhaud, for the sum of twenty marks (£13 13s. 4d.). The charter is in the Isle of Wight Record Office, as part of the Oglander archive (OG/V/1). This is unfortunate, in the sense that it must be assumed that it was acquired by Sir John Oglander (1585–1655) for some antiquarian reason; it cannot be localised to the Isle of Wight.<sup>2</sup> It seems likely that 'Scopwyke' can in fact be identified as Scopwick in Lincolnshire; palaeographically, the deed is datable to the later thirteenth century, perhaps the 1280s or 1290s. But it does offer one tiny piece of information about Wymond – a scrap which fits with our two other pieces of evidence about him: it terms him *clericus* (clerk).

Much more can be made from the second piece of documentary knowledge that we have about Wymond: the fact that he and another man, Nicholas de Campigne,<sup>3</sup> were registered early in 1279 in the royal chancery as having been appointed attorneys for three years by the abbey of Préaux.<sup>4</sup> The Benedictine abbey of Saint-Pierre at Préaux, in the Norman *bocage* (Eure département, France) had quite substantial estates in England, two of which became priories: Toft Monks (Norf.) and Warmington (Warks.).<sup>5</sup> Its other estates of manorial scale were at Aston Tirrold and Newbury (Berks.), Sturminster and Spettisbury (Dorset), and the hamlet of Watmore in Watlington (Oxon.).<sup>6</sup> Like other Norman abbeys, it relied on local men to run

<sup>1</sup> Sigillographers often refer to the object which makes the impression as the 'seal matrix' and the wax impression attached to a charter or other document as the seal, but here we adopt the terminology used in other branches of seal study and describe the silver object under discussion as the seal. See D. Collon (ed.), *7000 Years of Seals* (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J.M. Rigg, revised by S. Kelsey, 'Oglander, Sir John', in *ODNB*, 41, pp. 592–3.

<sup>3</sup> Coincidentally, one Peter de Champayne heads the list of witnesses to the Oglander charter; the name is surely French.

<sup>4</sup> *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1272–81*, p. 298.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *VCH Norfolk, 2*, pp. 464–5; *VCH Warks. 2*, pp. 131–2.

<sup>6</sup> D. Rouet, 'Le Patrimoine anglais et l'Angleterre vus à travers les actes du cartulaire de Saint-Pierre de Préaux', in P. Bouet and V. Gazeau (eds.), *La Normandie et l'Angleterre au Moyen Âge* (2003), pp. 99–116; the abbey's earlier charters have since been edited by D. Rouet: *Le Cartulaire de l'abbaye Bénédictine de Saint-Pierre-de-Préaux (1034–1227)*, Collection de documents inédits sur l'histoire de France, série in-8°, 34 (2005).



Fig. 1. Wymond de Brandon's seal. Photo: Oxfordshire Museum Service.



Fig. 2. The impression made by Wymond's seal. Photo: Oxfordshire Museum Service.

these estates for it, collecting rents and tithes and other income streams from those who were its tenants or were parishioners of its appropriated churches.<sup>7</sup> The priory of Toft Monks was perhaps the base for all of Préaux's estate-management activities in England; Warmington may have been directly subject to it rather than to the mother-house. The 'alien priories' that French and a very few other Continental abbeys had in England are today sometimes rather overlooked, as if they were minor affairs; but Toft Monks in 1295 was deemed capable of yielding a farm or levy of £100 annually to the Crown. Its monastic complement at this date is known to have been tiny: the prior and just one monk were together ordered by the Crown to go to Gloucester Hall, Oxford, in the same year, when a French attack on England was feared and all French nationals in England had come under suspicion.<sup>8</sup> The abbey's attorneys will have been the men who ran the estates for it; and if a grant of land was made to the abbey, it will have been one of its attorneys who formally took seisin (legal possession) of it. £100 was a sum large enough to support a far larger establishment, and shows what a valuable asset Préaux's English properties were: clearly, almost all of their revenues will have been sent to the mother house in France.

From one angle, our third piece of evidence, the seal itself, fits into this picture very well: reportedly, it was found in a field near Cholsey – and Cholsey is only a couple of miles from the Aston Tirrold estate of Préaux (and half way between Cholsey and Newbury). It is easy, then, to imagine that Wymond dropped it when on one of the frequent journeys that he must have taken on behalf of his employer, travelling around central and southern England so as to inspect each estate two or three times a year. The seal, which is 2 cm in diameter, also

<sup>7</sup> Bec's administration of its estates has been studied in exemplary fashion by Marjorie Morgan [later Chibnall], *The English Estates of the Abbey of Bec* (1946).

<sup>8</sup> D.J.A. Matthew, *The Norman Monasteries and their English Possessions* (1962), pp. 83, 151.

offers a little clue as to Wymond's personal foibles. It is lettered CAPVT.WYMVDI.DEBRAND', which with modern spacing and with its contractions expanded may be read as CAPVT WYMONDI DE BRANDON ('The head of Wymond de Brandon'). This is a most unusual form of inscription for a seal: 'Sigillum Wymundi de Brandon' ('The seal of Wymond de Brandon') is what we might have expected. The implication is that Wymond was extremely proud to be the possessor of a seal with such a realistic and classical-looking portrait, and wished to draw attention to this.

These strands of information offer a clue to Wymond's origins, geographical if not social. It is possible that Wymond took his name from the village of Brandon (Suff.) which lies near the border between Norfolk and Suffolk – as does Toft Monks, some 54 miles by road to the east. Although quite some distance separates Brandon and Toft Monks, an East Anglian explanation for what drew Wymond and Præaux together is clearly plausible.

Even with all the speculation above, Wymond is still a shadowy figure. Further documentation about his activities on behalf of Præaux may yet emerge, and hopefully other *scintillae* too. But he was not an established ecclesiastic – a holder of ecclesiastical office or of a cure of souls – nor, it seems, was he a university-trained clerk, a *magister*. He should perhaps be seen rather as a freelance professional, of a sort who in later centuries might choose such a career because it offered the option of marriage, but who in the thirteenth century was in a slightly ambivalent position: he was neither ecclesiastic nor ordinary layman, being set apart from both by his high level of literacy and numeracy, perhaps combined with some knowledge of land management and even a little knowledge of relevant areas of the law. New methods of estate management had created a demand for men like Wymond, and it is likely that he prospered: the fact that his seal was of silver, rather than some copper alloy, is certainly a good indication of his financial success, just as the portrait which so closely resembled a coveted Roman intaglio may have been intended as a reminder that he, too, had attained a high level of intellectual expertise.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEVICE

Roman gems were often set into medieval seal matrices, and not infrequently they were copied or, more frequently, adapted by lapidaries in the Middle Ages.<sup>9</sup> However, the device here is engraved on silver (a different process) and is thus integral to the seal itself, which is clearly in this case of thirteenth-century workmanship. Jean-Luc Chassel has observed that the imitation of intaglio gems in metal was a feature of the later Middle Ages, the result of a shortage of gems of sufficient quality.<sup>10</sup> This very fine seal is clearly a relatively early example of such substitution. The device is a clean-shaven male head in profile to the right and, as stated above, was most probably intended to be an actual portrait of Wymond de Brandon himself. Nevertheless, while nobody at least today could mistake the device as ancient Roman, it is closer to a classical prototype than very many other more stylised profile heads which are relatively common devices on English medieval seals.<sup>11</sup> The ultimate source may of course have been an actual ancient intaglio, perhaps set in another medieval personal seal like a silver example from an early thirteenth-century hoard unearthed at Cross-on-the-Hill near

<sup>9</sup> M. Henig, 'The Re-Use and Copying of Ancient Intaglios Set in Medieval Personal Seals, Mainly found in England', in N. Adams et al., *Image and Authority in Medieval Seals* (2008), pp. 25–34.

<sup>10</sup> J.-L. Chassel, 'De la diplomatique à la glyptique: notes sur l'usage des intailles sigillaires au Moyen Âge', in S. Gouguenheim et al. (eds.), *Retour aux sources. Textes, études et documents d'histoire médiévale* (2004), p. 45: 'A défaut de pouvoir se procurer une gemme d'une qualité suffisante ou porteuse du décor souhaité il est devenu fréquent de confectionner de petites matrices ovales et de donner à leur décor l'apparence d'une intaille: cette mode est largement représentée aux xive et xve siècles dans les contre-sceaux et les signets.'

<sup>11</sup> R. Linenthal and W. Noel, *Medieval Seal Matrices in the Schøyen Collection* (2004), pp. 7–8, nos. 30–4 and pp. 9–10, nos. 4 and 47; B. Spencer, 'Medieval Seal-Dies recently Found in London', *Antiquaries Journal*, 64 (1984), pp. 376–82, no. 22.

Stratford-on-Avon (Warks.); it is set with a cornelian intaglio of Augustan (late first-century BC) date, portraying the head of the god Apollo. The surrounding legend is anonymous but it bears the words :+*Caput + Omnium +XPc*, showing the head to have been interpreted here as none other than the head of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

It is at least plausible, considering that the engraving is in metal, that the ancient model for Wymond de Brandon's seal was a Roman coin, possibly one of Octavian, who later became the Emperor Augustus, struck at a time contemporary with the possible glyptic prototypes in the last third of the first century BC.<sup>13</sup> Such coins would have been frequent finds in southern Europe and certainly invited contemporary admiration and emulation. As is well known, the gold *augustales* struck for the Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II between 1231 and 1250 were closely based on a Roman imperial coin issue.<sup>14</sup> Features of particular note in relation to the present seal are the attractive, virtually Hellenizing physiognomy of the subject, his long hair and the well-executed side-burn in front of the ear, admittedly accentuated beyond the natural on the seal. Incidentally, unlike the other medieval seals cited above,<sup>15</sup> in which the head is portrayed in profile to the left, the head on this matrix is depicted facing to the right, as indeed are the heads on relevant Roman numismatic parallels (though of course Wymond's device would be reversed in impression, that is on the seal which most people would have seen on documents and letters).

It has long been realised that ancient gems and coins influenced sigillography in the high Middle Ages. Hans Wentzel located this copying and adapting activity in Paris, but there is no reason at all why London should not have been quite as attractive as a major centre of seal manufacture, given the power and wealth of the Angevin monarchy, whose main power base was here, and in addition London's importance as a centre of commerce.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Deodotus the goldsmith, who owned a property in the parish of All Hallows, Bread Street, employed a seal on a document dated 1277–8 which he had surely crafted himself and is certainly *à l'Antique*. It depicts a combination of two bearded human heads with the head of a horse upon the legs of a cockerel.<sup>17</sup> Although the seal was undoubtedly contemporary, it is very closely modelled on gems of a common ancient type. There is an ancient Roman example from excavations in Southwark, but such intaglios, which vary widely in detail, are disseminated throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>18</sup> The evidence assembled by John McEwan, which deals only with the signets of seal makers, not with their wider clientele,<sup>19</sup> confirms that the well-known statute of Edward I dating from 1300, which instructs seal engravers and cutters of stones on the weight and fineness of their materials, was clearly of direct relevance to practitioners of a very flourishing craft in England, fully capable of setting ancient gems as

<sup>12</sup> M. Henig, in N. Palmer and W.A. Seaby, 'An Early Thirteenth Century Hoard from Cross on the Hill, near Stratford-on-Avon', *Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society*, 93 (1983–4), pp. 106 (plate 1, fig. 1), 109.

<sup>13</sup> For example, M.-L. Vollenweider, *Die Porträtgemmen der römischen Republik. Katalog und Tafeln* (1972), p. 100, Taf. 155, 9 = BMC Empire I, Taf. 14, 18, no. 602.

<sup>14</sup> H. Kowalski, 'Die Augustalen Kaiser Friedrichs II', *Revue Suisse de Numismatique*, 55 (1976), pp. 77–150.

<sup>15</sup> In the sources listed in note 11.

<sup>16</sup> H. Wentzel, 'Portraits "à l'Antique" on French Mediaeval Gems and Seals', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 16 (1953), pp. 342–50. Note p. 346 and plate 49d, no. 29, which is the privy seal of Jean de la Pole, commissioner of the king of England on a document of 1286. The head has similarly refined features and the same distinctive long wavy lock.

<sup>17</sup> J. McEwan, 'Making a Mark in Medieval London: The Social and Economic Status of Seal-Makers', in P. Schofield (ed.), *Seals and their Context in the Middle Ages* (2015), pp. 82–3, fig. 5.6.

<sup>18</sup> C. Cowan et al., *Roman Southwark: Settlement and Economy. Excavations in Southwark 1973–91*, MoLA Monograph, 42 (2009), p. 148, fig. 1 and p. 230, small find <S5>; M. Maaskant-Kleibrink, *Catalogue of the Engraved Gems in the Royal Coin Cabinet, The Hague: The Greek, Etruscan and Roman Collections* (1978), pp. 346–50, nos. 1081–96; M. Henig and M. Whiting, *Engraved Gems from Gadara in Jordan: The Saïd Collection of Intaglios and Cameos*, Oxford University Committee for Archaeology Monograph, 6 (1987), pp. 31–2, nos. 304–13.

<sup>19</sup> McEwan, 'Making a Mark in Medieval London'.

personal *secreta*, copying them on hard stones or, indeed, as here, as was perhaps more often the case, adapting such devices when they engraved them on matrices of precious metal.<sup>20</sup>

It remains to speculate on how this small and very lovely object was displayed when not being employed to authenticate documents. Larger, official, seals were kept in pouches and, perhaps, hung on a utilitarian chain suspended from the girdle and simply produced whenever and wherever needed, but the suspension loop on this and on similar seals of precious metal, including gem-set seals, is suggestive of much more refined use as an item of jewellery as a pendant. This, like other examples of such personal seals, is bevelled at the back and carefully finished. It is hard to think that Wymond, who was so proud of his portrait, or for that matter the owners of such superlative examples respectively of silver and gold from Swanley (Kent) and Laindon (Essex), both set with Roman portrait gems, could have been hidden away such prized and high-status items; other contemporary personal seals were, after all, set as the bezels of rings and were certainly displayed as jewellery.<sup>21</sup>

Study and analysis of an inscribed seal such as this enables biographical and historical evidence to be brought together and for this then to be set in the wider intellectual, artistic and cultural currents of its time. In Wymond de Brandon's seal we are confronted by a very tangible reminder of the way in which the 'alien' priories and other English estates of French monastic houses were administered by Englishmen who travelled widely, criss-crossing the country on their employer's behalf. Fluent in Latin and, no doubt, in the French of England, Wymond was typical of a whole new world of literate administrators – but, as his seal suggests, he was exceptional in how he chose to present his own legal persona.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Raithby et al. (eds.), *The Statutes of the Realm*, 11 vols. (1810–28), vol. 1, p. 141. Cf. M. Henig and T.A. Heslop, 'Three Thirteenth-Century Seal Matrices with Intaglio Stones in the Castle Museum, Norwich', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 39:3 (1986), pp. 305–9.

<sup>21</sup> Henig, 'The Re-Use and Copying of Ancient Intaglios', in Adams et al., *Image and Authority in Medieval Seals*, pp. 27–8, figs. 3 and 4, and compare the Hereford ring also set with an ancient portrait gem, fig. 5. For discussion: R.W. Lightbown, *Mediaeval European Jewellery with a Catalogue of the Collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum* (1992), p. 237; J. Cherry, 'Medieval and Post-Medieval Seals', in Collon (ed.), *7000 Years of Seals*, p. 133; M. Campbell, *Medieval Jewellery in Europe 1100–1500* (2009), pp. 78–80, 103–4.