

“Unentangled in the intricate windings
of modern practice”: William Blake’s
Apprentice Copperplates and
Engravings

BY MARK CROSBY

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Engraving is Drawing on Copper & Nothing Else
Blake, *Public Address*, c. 1810 (E 574)

1 IN 1809 the antiquarian Richard Gough (1735–1809) bequeathed a substantial collection of preparatory drawings, copperplates, and proof impressions to the Bodleian Library. This material relates to his publications on British history and topography and medieval funerary monuments, as well as his work as the first director of the Society of Antiquaries, which included supervising the publication of both its journal and the occasional papers *Vetusta Monumenta*, along with other projects. During his time as director, Gough also worked on his self-published study *Sepulchral Monuments, in Great Britain* (1786–96). Illustrated with engravings by James Basire, engraver to the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society, *Sepulchral Monuments* was conceived as a comprehensive visual and textual account of British royal tombs “from the Norman Conquest to the Seventeenth Century.”¹ Although none of the work was published until 1786, Basire’s studio had be-

I am indebted to John Barrett, ARChiOx technical lead and senior photographer at the Bodleian Library, and Adam Lowe, director of Factum Arte and founder of the Factum Foundation for Digital Technology in Preservation, for their assistance with the research for this article. Michael Phillips, Ad Stijnman, and Joseph Viscomi kindly read and commented on early drafts and Robert N. Essick offered generous advice on the minute particulars of line engraving. Any infelicities are entirely my own.

1. Richard Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments, in Great Britain*, 2 vols. (London, 1786–96), vol. 1, part 1, title page.

gun the engraving project in the 1770s, a period that coincided with William Blake’s apprenticeship (1772–79). Among the materials in the Gough Collection are the copperplates after Blake’s preparatory drawings.² On the versos of three of the copperplates are incised linear patterns and motifs made with burins, a drypoint needle, and a compass, suggesting that these plates were used by an apprentice to practice and develop the techniques of line engraving. This article revisits Basire’s studio at 31 Great Queen Street and Blake’s apprenticeship period before describing the markings on these plates and offering evidence for their attribution to Blake.

Blake’s Apprenticeship with Basire

2 When Blake began his apprenticeship in 1772, he overlapped with Thomas Ryder for a short time³ and then was Basire’s only apprentice until James Parker joined the studio in August 1773. The Stationers’ Company records and the Register of Duties reveal that Basire did not take on another apprentice until 1779, when Blake completed his term and was released from his indenture.⁴ The prints issuing from Basire’s studio during Blake’s time were mainly line engravings executed using the mixed method of preliminary etching followed by engraving. Unlike the fashionable aesthetic produced by stipple engraving or mezzotint, line engraving used a variety of linear patterns to represent form and tone. It was an extremely time-consuming technique that took patience and skill to master and ensured that for architectural illustration the print was faithful to the original.⁵ Gough frequently praised Basire

While the title page of the first volume indicates that it is “Part I,” as the work took shape Gough split the volume into two parts: part 1, covering the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, and part 2, covering the fourteenth century. Volume 1, part 1 was published in 1786; volume 1, part 2 was published in 1796. The majority of the engravings after Blake’s drawings are in volume 1, parts 1 and 2. Volume 2, referred to on the title page as “Part II,” deals with the fifteenth century, and was also published in 1796. Gough didn’t complete a third volume, but published an introduction in 1799. There are, of course, examples of bibliographic variations in some copies.

2. Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) #12-47 (for preparatory drawings in the Gough Collection), but see also note 14.

3. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) [hereafter *BR(2)*] claims that Ryder’s term concluded on 16 August 1772 (16), two weeks after Blake began his apprenticeship, whereas Michael Phillips, *William Blake: Apprentice and Master* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2014) says that there was an overlap of three months (30).

4. Stationers’ Company Apprentice Register, 1 February 1763 to 5 December 1786, p. 15 (National Archives, Kew, INL 1/27, f. 133). Blake’s indenture has not survived; for a re-creation, see *BR(2)* 12-14, and for a contemporaneous example, see Phillips 28 (illus. 14 and caption).

5. Line engravings produce more impressions before needing to be reworked than mezzotints, which are limited to between 100 and 200 impressions.

for his ability to create accurate reproductions, observing that “Mr. James Basire[s] ... burin will do credit to every individual or body of men who employ it.”⁶ While much of Basire’s work came from the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society—particularly the illustrations for their respective journals, *Archaeologia* and *Transactions of the Royal Society*—his workshop also produced a range of prints to illustrate popular journals like the *European Magazine*, as well as portrait engravings of aristocrats and notable literary figures, including Andrew Marvell, John Dryden, and James Thomson. Many of these portrait engravings were exhibited at the Free Society of Artists.⁷ Basire was also a specialist in executing large-scale prints, such as “The Stoning of St. Stephen” (1753) after Raphael and “Pylades and Orestes” (1771) after Benjamin West’s famous painting. Beginning in the early 1770s, the Society of Antiquaries commissioned from him a series of large engravings of paintings depicting scenes from the lives of Henry VIII and Edward VI. His studio illustrated several popular travel narratives during the same period, such as James Cook’s hugely successful *A Voyage towards the South Pole, and round the World* (1777). In addition to the frontispiece, Basire contributed six engravings, including the large fold-out plate “The Landing at Mallicolo, One of the New Hebrides,” which was exhibited to much acclaim at the Free Society of Artists in 1778.⁸

- 3 In the same year, Charles Rogers’s *Collection of Prints in Imitation of Drawings* was published. This was a series of finely etched prints with mezzotint borders after the drawings of Renaissance masters, executed to replicate the aesthetic of the originals.⁹ Basire contributed eighteen engravings after Raphael and Caravaggio, among others, using stippling in combination with lines and other illusionistic effects.¹⁰ When taken with his other work, these prints demonstrate the breadth of his technical skill as an engraver utilizing a

6. John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 9 vols. (London, 1812–15) 2: 586.

7. See Algernon Graves, *The Society of Artists of Great Britain, 1760–1791; The Free Society of Artists, 1761–1783: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and Their Work from the Foundation of the Societies to 1791* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907) 24–26.

8. See *A Catalogue of the Pictures, Sculptures, &c. by the Society of Artists* (London, 1778) 4 (#16).

9. Many of these prints were produced in the 1760s and evince a range of techniques that imitate the autographic gestures associated with sketching on paper. These techniques give, as Viscomi observes, “the illusion of spontaneity” (e-mail correspondence, 1 October 2024).

10. See Charles Rogers, *A Collection of Prints in Imitation of Drawings*, 2 vols. (London, 1778) 1: 46, 57, 71, 105, 111, 114, 136, 151; and 2: 27, 32, 33, 34, 99, 134, 166, 182, 187, 228. William Wynne Ryland engraved most of the plates in this publication. According to Alexander Gilchrist, James Blake first approached Ryland, “a more famous man than Basire,” to take his son William as an apprentice (see *Life of William Blake*, 2 vols. [London: Macmillan and Co., 1863] 1: 13).

specific range of tools to create a visual language capable of reproducing original images on copper. He could employ firmly etched lines and simple hatching patterns to illustrate antiquarian and architectural subjects, or take a more sophisticated approach with the large historical plates that required smoother lines and intensely detailed hatching and cross-hatching. He was equally capable of creating the loosely and heavily etched lines typical of popular caricatures such as “The Farmer’s Return” after Hogarth (1762) and the forceful curved lines, careful stippling, and elaborate cross-hatching necessary for portrait engravings. Basire passed on these techniques, enigmatically described in the records of the Stationers’ Company as the “Art and Mystery” of engraving, to his apprentices.¹¹

- 4 Two years into his apprenticeship, Blake was sent to Westminster Abbey by his master to make preparatory drawings of the medieval royal tombs to illustrate Gough’s *Sepulchral Monuments*. The main source for our knowledge about his time in the abbey is Benjamin Heath Malkin, who almost certainly gathered the information directly from Blake:

He was employed in making drawings from old buildings and monuments, and occasionally, especially in winter, in engraving from those drawings. This occupation led him to an acquaintance with those neglected works of art, called Gothic monuments. There he found a treasure, which he knew how to value. He saw the simple and plain road to the style of art at which he aimed, unentangled in the intricate windings of modern practice. The monuments of Kings and Queens in Westminster Abbey, which surround the chapel of Edward the Confessor, particularly that of King Henry the Third, the beautiful monument and figure of Queen Elinor, Queen Philippa, King Edward the Third, King Richard the Second and his Queen, were among his first studies. All these he drew in every point he could catch, frequently standing on the monument, and viewing the figures from the top. The heads he considered as portraits; and all the ornaments appeared as miracles of art, to his Gothicised imagination. He then drew Aymer de Valence’s monument, with his fine figure on the top. Those exquisite little figures which surround it, though dreadfully mutilated, are still models for the study of drapery. But I do not mean to enumerate all his drawings, since they would lead me over all the old monuments in Westminster Abbey.¹²

The painter J. T. Smith recalls a conversation with Thomas Stothard that goes some way toward corroborating Malkin’s earlier account. According to Smith, Stothard considered that “Blake made a remarkably correct and fine drawing of the head of Queen Philippa” (illus. 1) from her effigy.¹³

11. BR(2) 13.

12. BR(2) 563.

13. BR(2) 615.



1. *Queen Philippa* (c. 1773–77). Pencil on paper, sheet 48.8 x 30.5 cm. Gough Maps 225, f. 205. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

5 Malkin's account has been taken as the primary authority for attributing to Blake some of the preparatory drawings of the royal tombs in the collections of the Bodleian Library and the Society of Antiquaries, although most of the drawings are, by convention, signed "Basire." Based on Malkin's description, Blake started sketching the tombs in 1774. Over a span of three to four years, he produced more than fifty drawings.¹⁴ Malkin's observation that Blake spent time, "especially in winter, ... engraving from those drawings" has been used to attribute to him some, but not all, of the engravings after his sketches. For instance, Roger Eason and Essick ascribe twenty-three engravings in *Sepulchral Monuments* to Blake, although only those of the six oval portraits of kings and queens have been widely accepted as his work.¹⁵ Question marks hover over the attribution of the rest of the engravings after his drawings.¹⁶ This is partly because volume 1, part 1 of *Sepulchral Monuments* was published in 1786, seven years after Blake completed his apprenticeship, and volume 1, part 2 appeared in 1796. One of the engravings, of the monument of Queen Eleanor after his drawing, is dated 1783, which appears to preclude him as the engraver of this print. Like the preparatory drawings, all the engravings after Blake's sketches bear Basire's signature, using variations of the formulation "Basire del & Sc" to denote authorship or delineation (del) of the drawing and the engraving (Sc). It was common practice for the master engraver to sign all the work coming from his studio, and in the case of the engravings for *Sepulchral Monuments*, Basire's signature was an imprimatur of accuracy. According to Gough, the undertaking would not have been feasible without Basire. Recalling his conception of the project in 1772, Gough relates in his manuscript autobiography that "M^r. Basire's Specimens of drawing & engraving gave me so much satisfaction th it was impossible to resist t impulse of carrying such a design into executi" [*sic*].¹⁷ In

14. Forty-seven are in the Gough Collection at the Bodleian. There are also nine, of effigies, wall paintings, and tombs, at the Society of Antiquaries. My figure for the Bodleian differs from Butlin partly because it includes works hitherto not attributed to Blake. For these new attributions, see Crosby, "The Gothic Artist: William Blake's Apprentice Drawings and Copperplates in the Bodleian Library," *Bodleian Library Record* (forthcoming).

The Society of Antiquaries drawings are highly finished and were displayed during Joseph Ayloff's lecture to the society on 12 March 1778. His *Account of Some Ancient Monuments in Westminster Abbey* was published with illustrations after Blake's preparatory drawings in 1780 and reissued in the second volume of *Vetusta Monumenta* in 1789.

15. Roger R. Eason and Robert N. Essick, *William Blake, Book Illustrator*, vol. 2 (Memphis: American Blake Foundation, 1979) 57-61; Robert N. Essick, *William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 118-20.

16. See also Robert N. Essick, *William Blake, Printmaker* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 30-32.

17. Bodleian Library, Gough Middlesex 11, ff. 25-26. For Gough's inception of *Sepulchral Monuments*, see Nichols 6: 622.

Sepulchral Monuments, Gough praises him for being "faithful in his transcripts and modest in his prices."¹⁸ As engraver to the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society, Basire was considered one of Britain's foremost practitioners of intaglio graphics at the time and, as such, would have appealed to the connoisseur collectors and antiquarians who were members of the societies, or subscribed to their publications.

6 The Gough correspondence in the Bodleian reveals that drawings of tombs to illustrate *Sepulchral Monuments* were being prepared for engraving by Basire's studio as early as October 1773.¹⁹ By 1773, Blake had learned the basic techniques of line engraving, to judge from the first of two states of "Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion," his engraving after a figure from Francesco Rossi Salvati's copy of Michelangelo's *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (1549). The first state (illus. 2) is undated but contains a manuscript inscription in Blake's hand: "Engraved when I was a beginner at Basires". On the second, he has incised "Engraved by W Blake 1773 from an old Italian Drawing". There are differences in the linear patterns between the states, but the first shows that he was able to execute dense webs of hatching and cross-hatching.²⁰ Blake covered the entire surface of the plate with various hatching systems to represent different features, such as rock, water, clothing, hair, and skin. The coherence between these systems is inconsistent and, as such, the tonal scale is limited compared with the second state.²¹ Nevertheless, the first state demonstrates that he had learned the basic methods of hatching to create form and tone as early as the year following the start of his apprenticeship.

18. Gough, *Sepulchral Monuments* vol. 1, part 1, p. 9.

19. Writing to Rev. Michael Tyson on 27 October 1773, Gough mentions having the drawings of the "Essex monuments" prepared for engraving (Nichols 8: 608). The Essex monuments refer to the tombs of Robert and Thomas de Vere; there is an unsigned and undated preparatory drawing by Tyson of the Robert de Vere tomb and effigy (Gough Maps 225, f. 131). Both monuments were engraved and published (*Sepulchral Monuments* vol. 1, part 1, p. 68, pl. 24; vol. 1, part 2, p. 130, pl. 52). Also see Tyson to Gough, November 1773, about having Tyson's preparatory drawing of the Hawkwood tomb (Nichols 8: 609) engraved for *Sepulchral Monuments* (vol. 1, part 2, p. 153, pl. 59). For Gough's correspondence with Tyson, including discussions of drawings and engravings for *Sepulchral Monuments*, see Bodleian Libraries, MS. Gough gen. top. 44, ff. 477-532.

20. For differences between the two states, see Essick, *Printmaker* 185-86.

21. Some of the darker areas in the first state, such as the folds of clothing, may have been made by touching up the plate with a burin; that is, Blake etched the first state and may have added some engraving work to deepen lines so that they would hold ink and print more darkly. I'm indebted to Ad Stijnman for this observation.



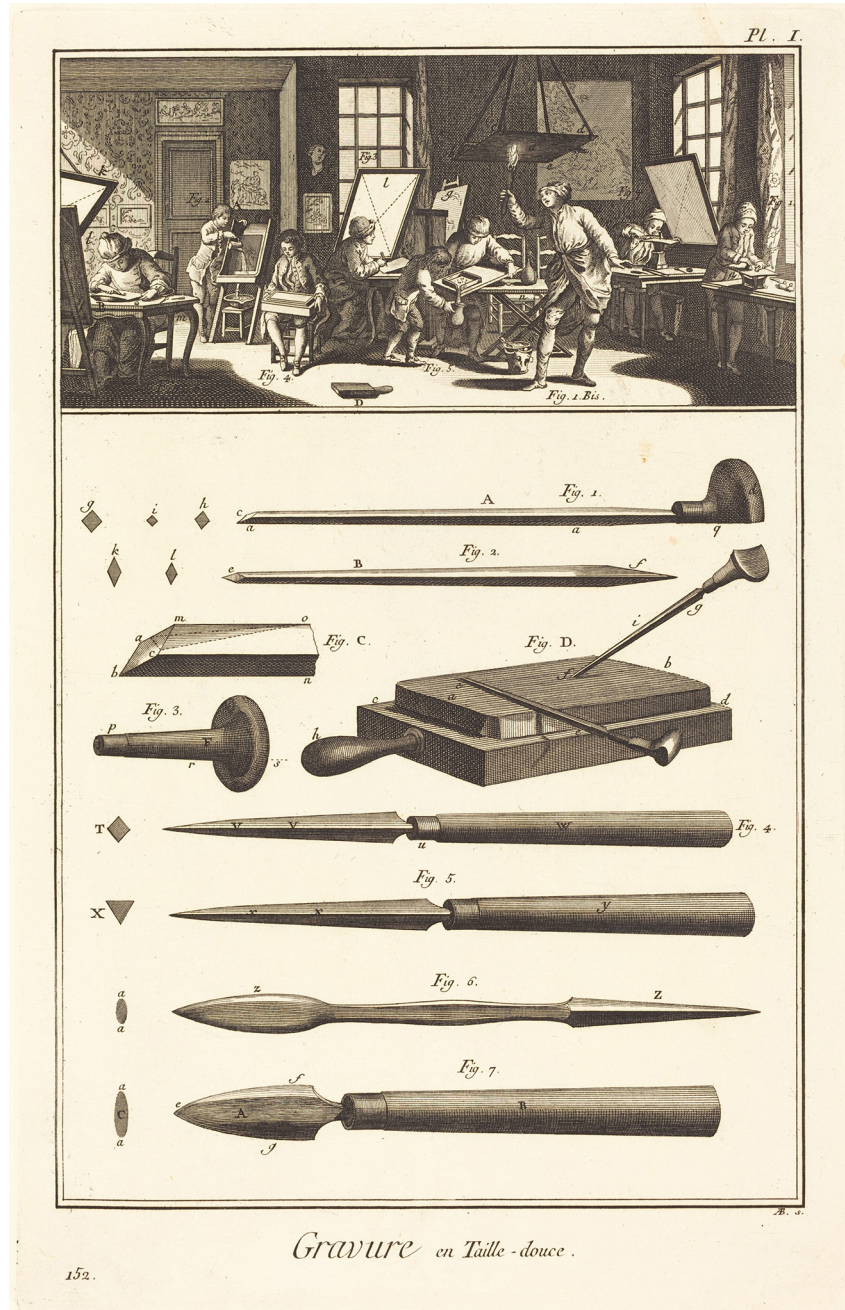
2. "Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion," first state (c. 1773). Line engraving, sheet 26.6 x 15.6 cm. Fitzwilliam Museum, P.391-1985. Photo: © Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

Three Copperplates

- 7 As noted, on the versos of three copperplates after Blake's Westminster Abbey drawings there are hatching and cross-hatching patterns and other incised markings that suggest the hand of an apprentice. To make these incised markings,

apprentice engravers had a range of tools available, such as burins, needles, scrapers, and burnishers (illus. 3).²²

22. On Blake's engraving techniques, see <<https://www.blakearchive.org/exhibit/illuminatedprinting>>.

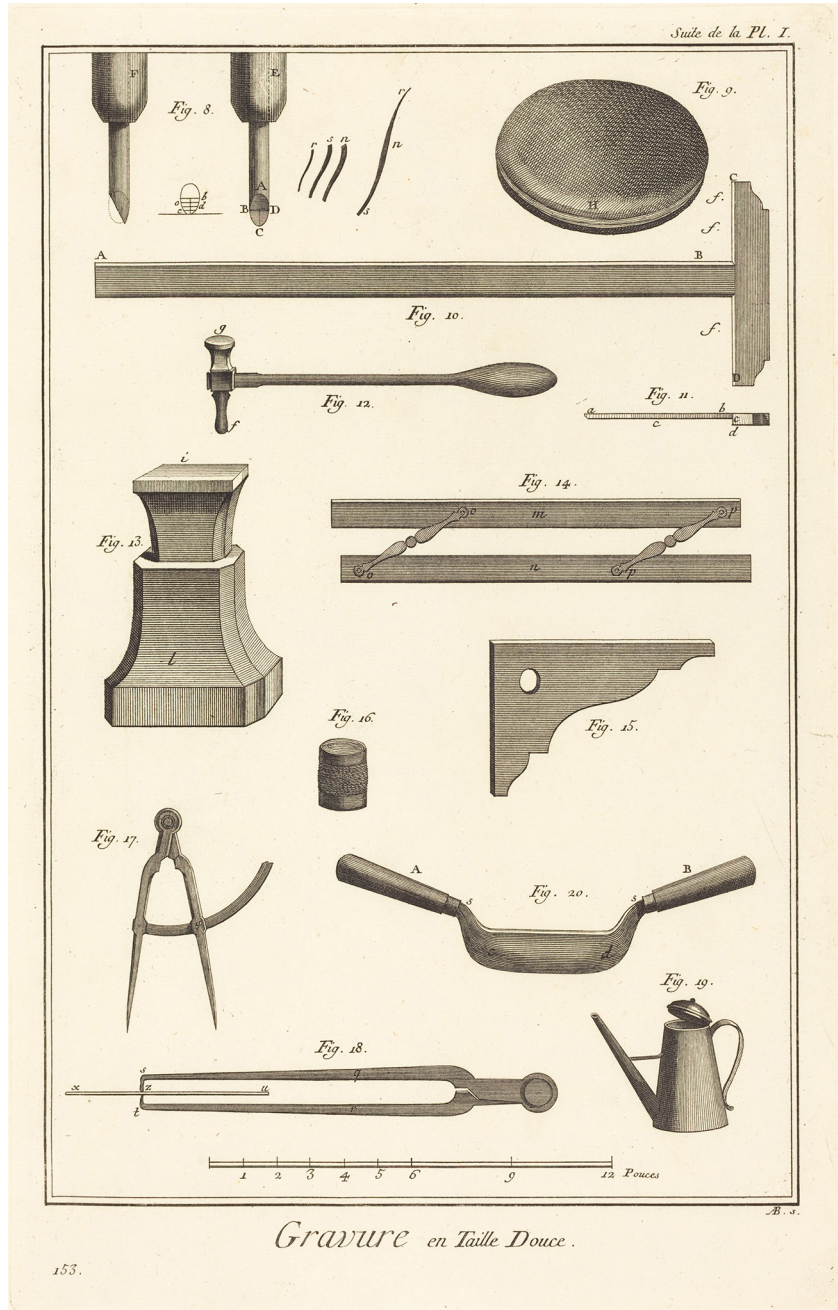


3. Antonio Baratta after A.-J. de Fehrt, "Gravure en Taille-douce: Pl. I," *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. Sheet 40.2 x 26.3 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1996.20.1.

Many of the copperplates after his preparatory drawings also contain evidence of *repoussage*, a technique that uses a small ballpoint hammer (illus. 4) on the verso of the plate to rework or correct areas on the recto.²³ Much of this reworking corresponds to decorative details of the tombs, including Latin inscriptions, or the titles of the images.

While it is tempting to attribute *repoussage* to the hand of an apprentice rather than a master engraver, it was com-

23. For discussion of *repoussage* in Blake's extant copperplates, see Mei-Ying Sung, *William Blake and the Art of Engraving* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009) 73-118.



4. Antonio Baratta after Benoît-Louis Prévost and A.-J. de Fehrt, "Gravure en Taille Douce: Suite de la Pl. I." *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. Sheet 40.2 x 26.3 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1996.20.2. Fig. 12 in this print depicts the ballpoint hammer.

mon practice for plates to be corrected.²⁴ *Repoussage* is discernible with the naked eye, but the incised linear patterns and markings are difficult to see without the assistance of magnification.

- 8 In early 2022, the Bodleian established a collaborative research and development partnership with the Factum Foundation—ARCHiOx (Analysis and Recording of Cultural Heritage in Oxford)—to trial a prototype three-dimensional imaging system that records the microtopography of copperplates. The Selene Photometric Stereo System captures both color and surface data simultaneously at over one million pixels per square inch. Recordings map the surface of the copperplate, making it possible to measure not only the width but also the depth of an etched or engraved feature by examining a cross-section. For example, Selene enabled the analysis of line depths from the copperplates of the six oval portraits of monarchs after Blake's sketches. For each portrait, measurements were taken through the lines forming the eyebrows, cheek, and hair; they revealed a uniform depth of approximately 40 microns,²⁵ indicating a consistency of technique and application. To offer some context, the indentations made by a rocker from a selection of mezzotint plates held at the Bodleian measure approximately 20 microns, while the lines on Basire's engraved facsimile of the Gough Map of Great Britain measure between 90 and 150 microns in depth.

Aymer de Valence and John of Eltham

- 9 Selene also mapped the incised patterns and markings on the versos of the three copperplates under consideration. Most of the lines have tapered ends and a uniform depth of 250 microns, suggesting the use of a burin, although this finding doesn't rule out the possibility that there was an initial drypoint stage. The versos of these plates were never intended to be printed and appear to have been practice spaces for an apprentice to learn the basics of intaglio graphics. One of the first lessons was, as Stijnman observes, "to engrave straight and curved lines."²⁶ The linear patterns on these versos are consistent with those on the rectos of

24. See Ad Stijnman, *Engraving and Etching, 1400–2000: A History of the Development of Manual Intaglio Printmaking Processes* (London: Archetype Publications, 2012) 172–73.

Proof impressions in the Gough Collection of engravings published in *Sepulchral Monuments* reveal that prior to the addition of titles and page and plate numbers, Gough inspected and annotated the prints. Most of these annotations are of titles and page numbers and, in some cases, Basire's signature as author of the original drawings and the engravings (see Bodleian Library, Gough Maps 227, f. 68; Gough Maps 228, ff. 68, 118).

25. A micron is a unit of measurement equating to 1/1000 mm.

26. Stijnman 87.

the copperplates (and printed impressions) of the six oval portraits and the first state of "Joseph of Arimathea." For instance, on the verso of the copperplate of the figures on the tombs of Aymer de Valence and John of Eltham, there is a small area of dense cross-hatching approximately 5–10 mm. in length, with lines 250 microns deep and 170 microns wide (visible in *illus. 6*). There is also a cluster of seven lines with tapered ends, some of which overlap, approximately 30 mm. long and the same depth and width as the cross-hatching. More centrally, an ovoid shape 14 mm. in length, with lines 130 microns deep and 250 microns wide, could be a quill or the fletching of an arrow (*illus. 5*).

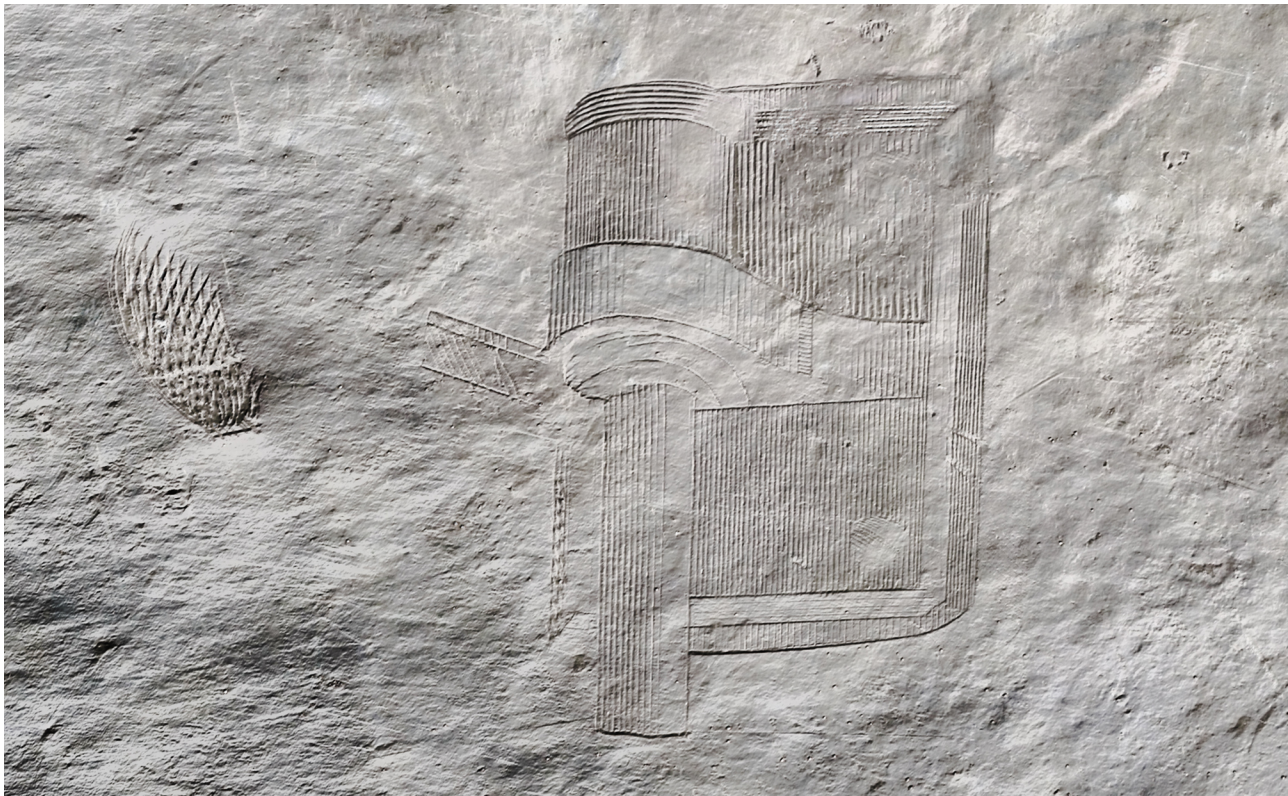


5. Copperplate of the tombs of Aymer de Valence and John of Eltham, magnified detail of the verso, showing fletching. To the left is a cluster of *repoussage*. Gough Copperplate d. 86. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The microtopography of the printing plate was recorded with a method of three-dimensional acquisition called photometric stereo. This technique involves the capture of four aligned images, each lit at intervals of ninety degrees. Software is used to calculate the position and intensity of the shadows cast over the surface of the plate.

A rectilinear shape that possibly represents a classical column, approximately 33 mm. high by 23 mm. wide, is delineated with vertical and horizontal parallel lines with squared ends, some curved lines, and areas of cross-hatching (*illus. 6*).²⁷ These lines are shallowly incised, 35 microns

27. Basire's studio engraved plates depicting classical columns for both *Ionian Antiquities* and James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *Antiquities*



6. Copperplate of the tombs of Aymer de Valence and John of Eltham, magnified detail of the verso, showing an area of cross-hatching on the left and a rectilinear shape on the right. Gough Copperplate d. 86. ARChiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The shading scale has been adjusted in this image so that the incised markings are visible. To create the shading scale, depth maps were generated to encode relative height at each pixel, storing three-dimensional data within two-dimensional image files. Using these depth maps reveals the shallow etching. Such renders can be made either in the absence of the printing plate's color or with some of the color added to the shading.

deep and 170 microns wide. As with the other linear patterns on this plate, there is no burring.²⁸ Areas of the rectilinear shape are worn, with some lines closed up and flattened. This could reflect deliberate reworking of the plate by an apprentice using a burnisher or be the result of work on, and printing from, the recto.²⁹

of Athens. See *Ionian Antiquities* part 1 (1769), chap. 1, pls. 5-6, and chap. 3, pls. 3-6; *Antiquities of Athens* vol. 1 (1762), chap. 1, pls. 2-4, and chap. 2, pls. 6-7.

28. When a burin incises lines into the surface of a copperplate, it pushes the copper up on either side of the line to create burring. When a line is incised with a drypoint needle, a burr is formed on one side. All burring on this plate has been removed, probably by burnishing, scraping, or during the etching and printing of the recto. It was common practice for eighteenth-century printmakers to create clean lines by removing burring during the final stages of engraving. Evidence of burr in a print was considered a defect.

29. For discussion of the burnisher as a method of correction, see Stijnman 172.

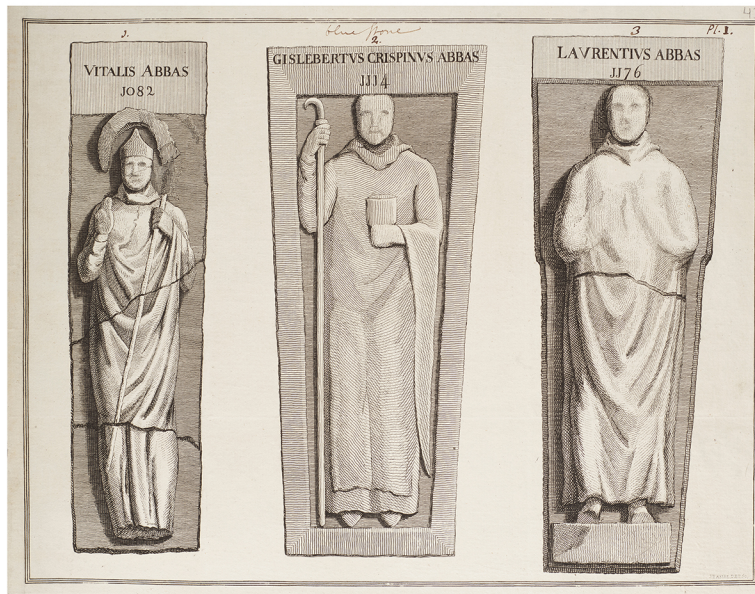
Three Abbots

- 10 Extensive evidence of an apprentice's using a copperplate to hone techniques is on the verso of the plate depicting the three abbots in Westminster Abbey (illus. 7 and 8),³⁰ which is filled with a variety of patterns, including hatching, cross-hatching, curved lines, semicircles, and round holes. Many of the lines have tapered or squared ends, indicating the use of a burin.³¹ Each pattern is accorded a distinct area of the plate, with occasional overlap; multiple areas of hatching and cross-hatching show that this was an intentional practice space for an engraver to learn through repetition.³² With

30. For the attribution of the preparatory drawing to Blake, see Crosby, "The Gothic Artist."

31. There is no evidence of burring.

32. There is no evidence of ink in any of the incised lines, suggesting that the verso was never printed. Specks of white chalk can be seen in



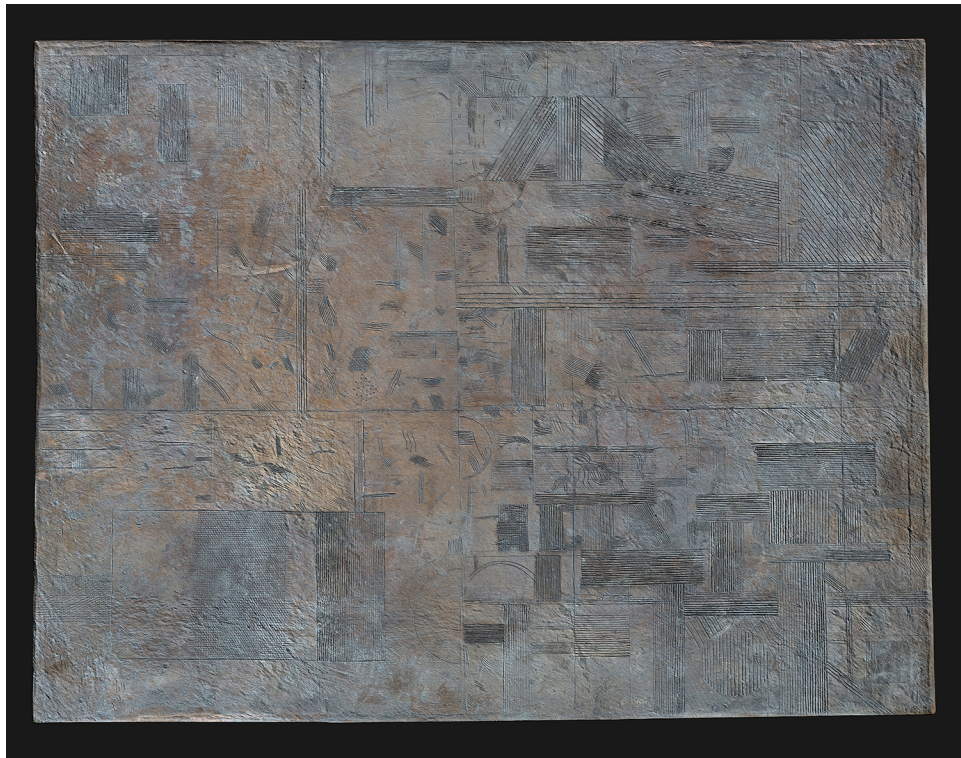
7. Clockwise from top left: drawing (Gough Maps 225, f. 56), detail of the recto of the copperplate (Gough Copperplate d. 57), and print (*Sepulchral Monuments* vol. 1, part 1, p. 10, pl. 1) of the tombs of three abbots. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

data from the three-dimensional recording made by Selene, Adam Lowe created a functional facsimile of the verso of this plate (illus. 9). The facsimile plate was created with UV-cured elevated printing, a process involving hundreds of layers of UV-cured ink, each layer 8 microns thick. It was then inked and printed on a traditional copperplate rolling

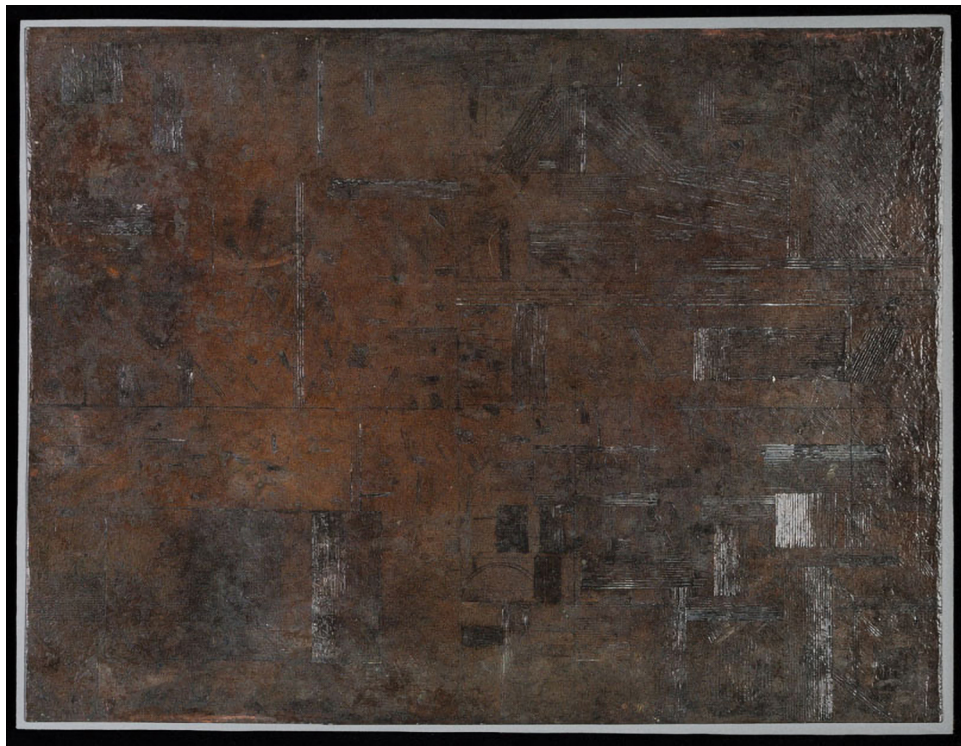
press; the resulting print (illus. 10) has a marginally stronger plate tone because of the slight stipple on the surface of the UV-cured material.³³ The images generated by Selene, in concert with the facsimile of the verso and prints pulled from it, yield more details than are discernible with traditional forms of magnification.

the deeper hatched lines. Chalk would have been used to transfer the image from the preparatory drawing to the copperplate or to clean the plate. For transfer and counterproving methods, see Essick, *Printmaker* 12-15.

33. If the plate was rematerialized in copper and the surface polished, this plate tone could be removed.



8. (above) Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, verso. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.
9. (below) Adam Lowe, facsimile of the verso of Gough Copperplate d. 57. Factum Foundation.





10. Adam Lowe, print from the facsimile of the verso of Gough Copperplate d. 57. Factum Foundation.

11 The most conspicuous incised markings are horizontal and vertical parallel lines and hatching (illus. 11). The majority of the lines are equidistant and form distinct rectilinear areas, with each area incised to line depths of 250-70 microns and widths of 250 microns. The consistency of depth indicates that the engraver was practicing applying uniform pressure; the consistency of width we see in the lines and in the space between them suggests that the engraver was attempting to create an even tonal effect. There is one cluster of sharp-pointed parallel lines varying in length, creating the illusion of a circle (illus. 12). This cluster is approximately 27 mm. in diameter, with lines that are 270 microns deep and 300 microns wide; it reveals that the engraver was perfecting line lengths with uniform depth and width to form a circular shape with consistent tone. For an engraving studio such as Basire's, where lines and linear patterns

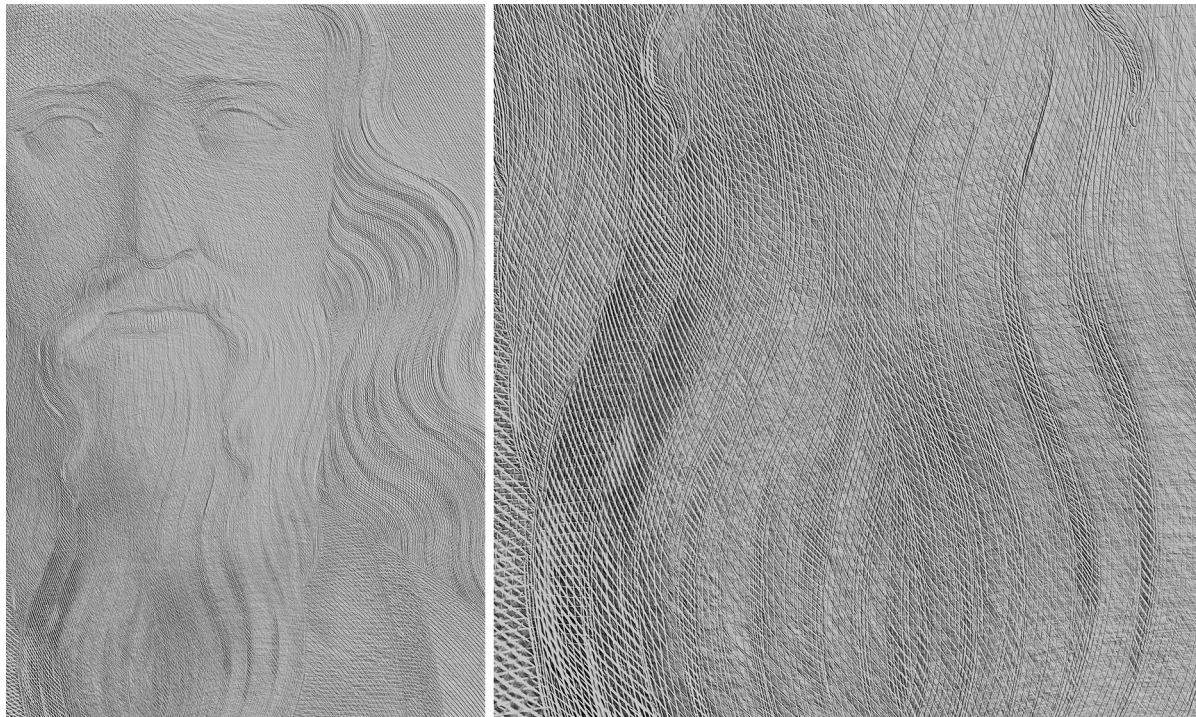
were the foundation of the house style—and would become for Blake a tenet of his artistic theory—incising equidistant parallel lines into the surface of a copperplate would have been one of the first skills an apprentice needed to acquire. The copperplates after Blake's drawings, particularly the images of the tombs, are circumscribed with double or triple line borders, and there is extensive use of parallel lines and hatching in the engraved oval portraits to delineate, for instance, areas of Edward III's beard and clothing (illus. 13). In his earliest attributed engraving, Blake employed parallel lines in combination with dense webs of hatching and cross-hatching to represent the figure and background of Joseph of Arimathea.



11. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing horizontal and vertical parallel lines. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



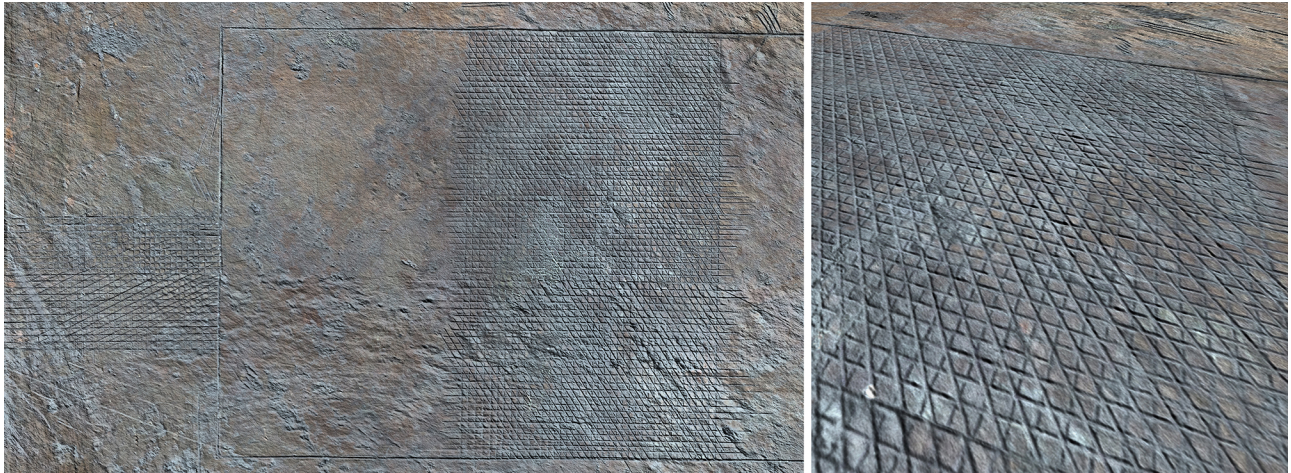
12. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing parallel lines creating a circle. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



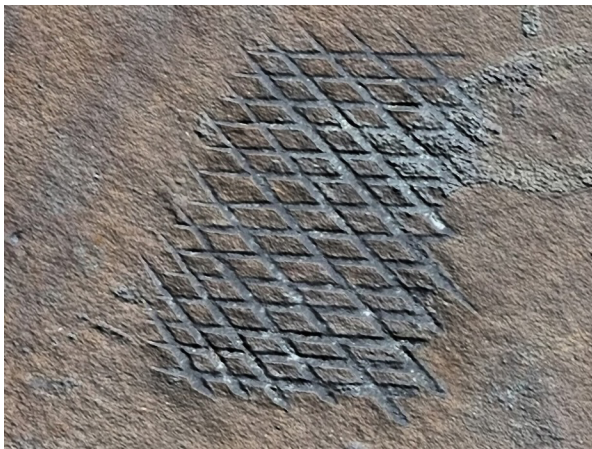
13. Copperplate of the portrait of Edward III from his monument, magnified detail of the recto, showing his beard. The shading scale has been adjusted in this image so that the etched markings are visible. Gough Copperplate d. 107. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

12 There are two rectangular areas of cross-hatching (illus. 14), as well as some smaller areas similar in size to the cross-hatching on the verso of the copperplate depicting the tombs of Aymer de Valence and John of Eltham (see the cross-hatched area on the left of illus. 6). The smaller rectangle is a grid of horizontal and vertical parallel lines 250 microns apart and 170 microns deep; over most of it the engraver added diagonal lines of the same dimensions. He

followed a similar approach with the larger area. Some of the horizontal and diagonal lines extend beyond this rectangle, suggesting that he was less concerned with creating the illusion of the rectangular shape than with maintaining consistency in the depth and width of the cross-hatched lines. Such consistency was crucial, as we have seen, to achieve an even tonal effect.



14. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing (left) two rectangular areas of cross-hatching and (right) a detail of the larger. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



15. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing area of cross-hatching. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

In the case of the cross-hatched rectilinear shape shown in illus. 15, the shallow depth of the lines indicates that a drypoint needle was utilized to score the lozenges. The copperplates of the oval portraits after Blake's sketches all display extensive use of cross-hatching to create form and tone. And, like Blake's "Joseph of Arimathea" print, the dot and lozenge technique is employed on the facial features and clothing on those copperplates. While there are no examples of dot and lozenge on this practice plate, there is a cluster of round holes with slightly raised edges that are connected with shallow scratches made with a drypoint needle (illus. 16).

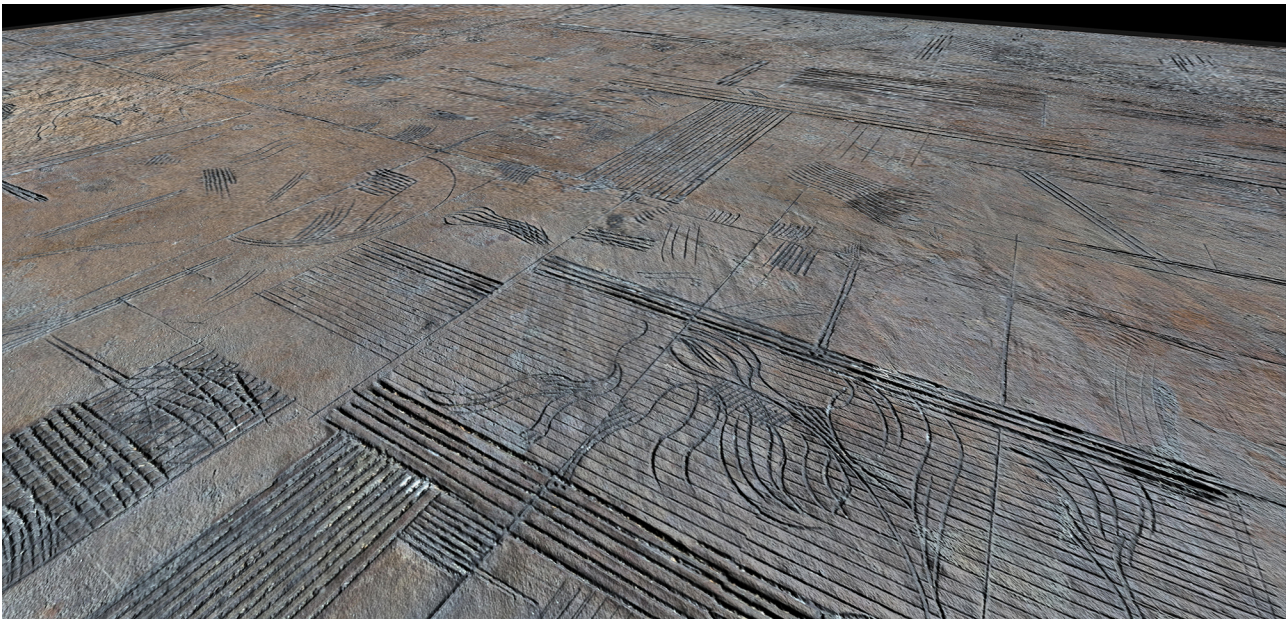


16. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing a cluster of dots or flicks. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

13 This verso contains curved lines approximately 300 microns deep and 200 microns wide (illus. 17), some of which appear to form vegetative shapes (illus. 18). In the copperplates of the oval portraits, such lines delineate hair (illus. 19); the moustaches and beards of Richard II and Edward III, for example, consist of a series of curved lines augmented with cross-hatching. In “Joseph of Arimathea,” Blake uses curved lines for the beard and to depict the lips and eyes.



17. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing curved lines. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



18. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing vegetative shapes. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



19. Left: Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing vegetative shapes. Gough Copperplate d. 57. Right: Copperplate of the portrait of Richard II from his monument, magnified detail of the recto, showing his moustache. Gough Copperplate d. 111. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



20. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing frond. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The vegetative shapes on the practice plate, including what seems to be a frond (illus. 20), could also relate to some of the plant decorations on the tombs sketched by Blake, such as Queen Eleanor's monument (illus. 21),³⁴ and anticipate the tendrils in the illuminated books, such as on the title page of *Songs of Innocence*.

34. Leafy oak branches extend above the decorative shields on the monument of Queen Eleanor (Bodleian Library, Gough Maps 225, f. 126) and decorate the trefoil arches above Countess Aveline's and Aymer de Valence's tombs (Gough Maps 225, ff. 134, 145); on the monument of Elinor of Bohun (see Crosby, "The Gothic Artist," for the attribution of the drawing to Blake), tiny flowers and other vegetation are inscribed into the copper (Gough Maps 225, f. 210; *Sepulchral Monuments* vol. 1, part 2, p. 159, pl. 60).



21. Clockwise from bottom left: Drawing (Gough Maps 225, f. 126) and the recto of the copperplate (Gough Copperplate d. 12), plus details, of the monument of Queen Eleanor (side view). ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

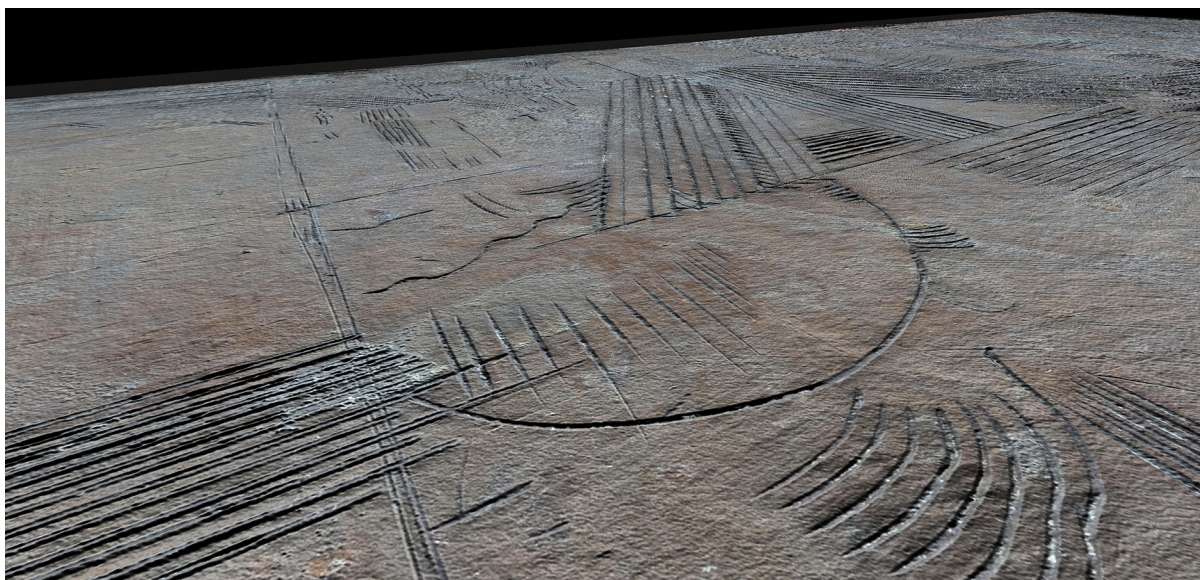
In the drawing, to the left of the upper plinth of the tomb, is an outline in pen and ink of a heraldic cross that enlarges the minute shaded heraldic cross prefacing a Latin inscription on the upper plinth. The outline cross gestures to the high degree of accuracy that Basire (and Gough) expected for these preparatory drawings.

14 Semicircles with puncture holes on their central axes indicate the use of a compass (illus. 22). They are shallowly incised to a depth of 15-25 microns and are uniformly 24 mm. in diameter. The ability to create semicircles and circles would have been important in Basire's studio; a number of the engravings for publications sponsored by the Society of Antiquaries were of architectural plans and Ro-

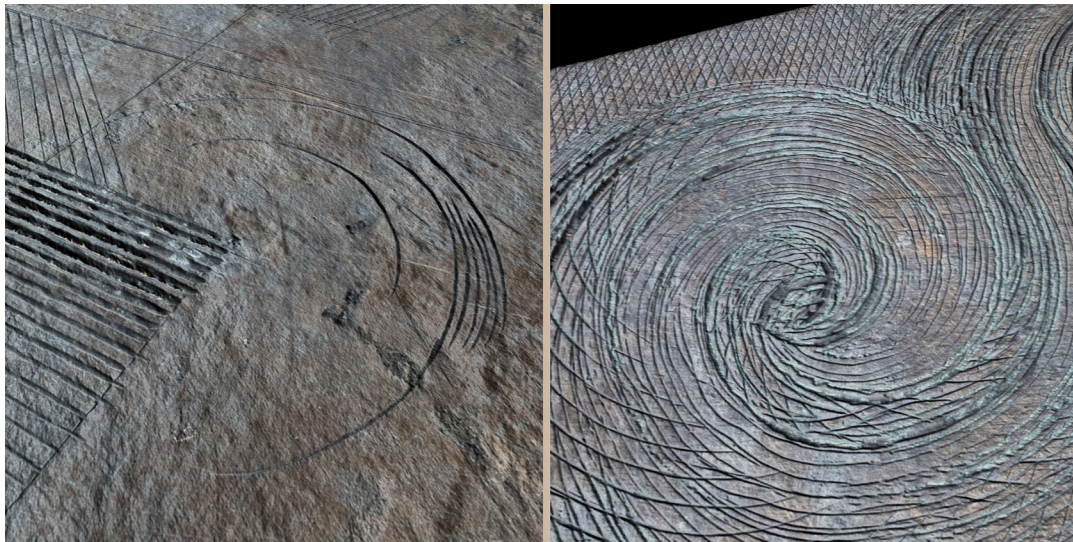
man coinage.³⁵ We can also see the utilization of semicircles in the six oval portraits, particularly for the swirls and curls

35. See, for instance, *Archaeologia* vol 2. (1773), pls. 1-2, 18; vol. 4 (1777), pls. 3-5, 20-21.

For other publications, not sponsored by the society, containing architectural prints produced by Basire's studio of classical monuments and cross-sections of columns, see note 27.



22. Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing semicircles. Gough Copperplate d. 57. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



23. (above) Left: Copperplate of the tombs of three abbots, magnified detail of the verso, showing semicircles. Gough Copperplate d. 57. Right: Copperplate of the portrait of Henry III from his monument, magnified detail of the recto, showing his hair. Gough Copperplate d. 77. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.
 24. (below) Drawing of Aymer de Valence's tomb, detail of the trefoil, showing *pentimento* semicircles (lower left). Gough Maps 225, f. 144. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

of the hair of Henry III (illus. 23). Circles are a decorative feature of some of the tombs that Blake sketched, such as the roundels containing trefoil motifs adorning the sedilia.³⁶ His preparatory drawing of Aymer de Valence's effigy, for example, includes a trefoil containing a knight riding a horse (illus. 24); there is evidence of *pentimento* in the outline, with faint pencil semicircles discernible under magnification to the left of the lower left lobe, indicating that he made an initial attempt at drawing this part of the trefoil. Blake used a compass in some of his post-apprenticeship commissions; for instance, he incised semicircles on his plate for Henry Emlyn's *Proposition for a New Order in Architecture* (1781) (illus. 25).³⁷ In his illuminated books, he frequently employs circles as motifs of light and containment structures, and, indeed, the compass became a pictorial motif in his work.³⁸



36. Bodleian Library, Gough Maps 225, ff. 49, 117, 125.

37. For Emlyn, see Essick, *Commercial Book Illustrations* 22-23.

38. The frontispiece to *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) depicts the white-bearded Urizen circumscribed in a circle, possibly the sun, wielding a golden compass; in *Jerusalem* (c. 1804-20) pl. 12, an inverted figure holds a compass against a globe.

See also his watercolor designs for Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1795-97), Night VII, p. 21 and Night VIII, p. 14; Ode to Adversity, p. 4 from his watercolors illustrating Thomas Gray's *Poems* (1797-98); and his color-printed drawing *Newton* (c. 1795-1805), in which the titular figure uses a compass to draw an arc within a triangle.



25. Pl. 2 in Henry Emlyn, *A Proposition for a New Order in Architecture* (London: Printed by J. Dixwell, 1781). Blake used a compass to inscribe the shallow semicircles at the top and bottom of the design. Collection of Robert N. Essick.

Richard II and Queen Anne

- 15 The verso of the copperplate after Blake's sketch depicting the monument of Richard II and Queen Anne (side view) also contains markings suggestive of apprentice work. There are the letters "I x B" (probably the Latinate formula for the initials of James Basire), a loose-looped spiral, and the numbers "1" and "2" (illus. 26) incised by a burin with a round or oval tip, called a scorper. To achieve the zigzag effect, the engraver placed the tip of the scorper at an angle

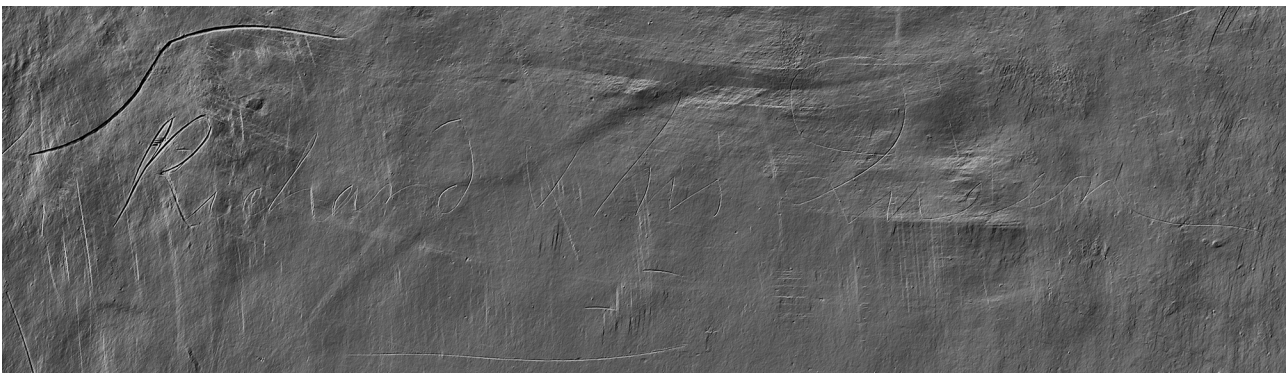
against the surface of the plate and wiggled from left to right (known as "trembling"), slowly moving forward to create rows of semicircular grooves.³⁹ In addition, there are incised lines with tapered ends and a group of small holes made with a drypoint needle, similar to the cluster on the verso of the three abbots plate. A faint drypoint inscription reads "Richard X his Queen" (illus. 27). Running left to

39. See Stijnman 164 and n327.



26. (above) Copperplate of Richard II and Queen Anne, magnified detail of the verso, showing the letters "I x B", a loose-looped spiral, and the number "1" (the number "2" is not shown in this image). Gough Copperplate d. 109. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

27. (below) Copperplate of Richard II and Queen Anne, magnified detail of the verso, showing the scratched inscription "Richard X his Queen". The shading scale has been adjusted in this image so that the drypoint markings are visible. Gough Copperplate d. 109. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



right and in the normal orientation (as opposed to reverse, or mirror, writing), the inscription was never intended to be printed but served simply as a label to identify the subject on the recto. With lines approximately 35 microns deep and 170 microns wide, it was scratched to the same depth and width as the rectilinear shape that appears to represent a classical column on the verso of the plate illustrating the tombs of Aymer de Valence and John of Eltham. The inscription is less controlled than the rectilinear shape and was almost certainly done quickly.⁴⁰

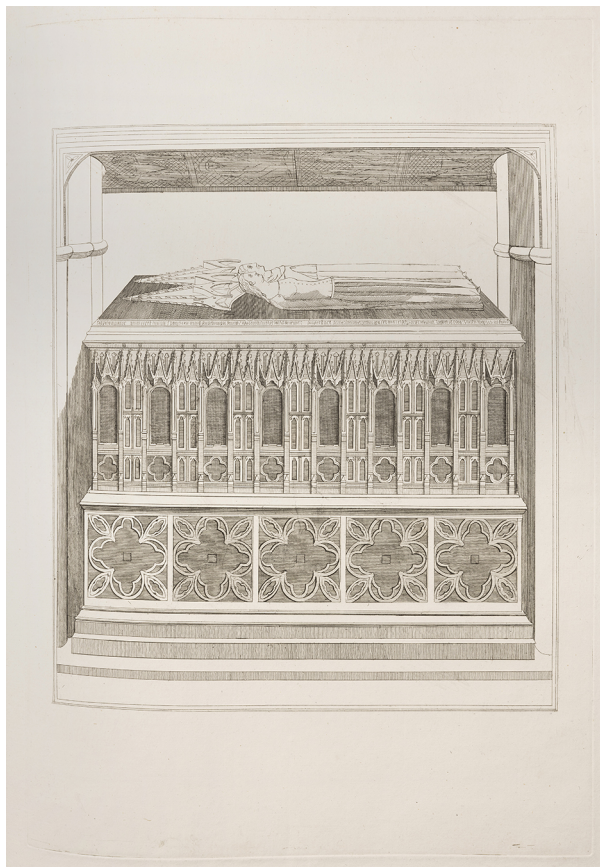
- 16 There are two proof impressions of this plate in the Gough Collection (illus. 28). One is an early state with the effigies partially etched and before any lettering; the other is a later state with the effigies fully etched and the border and lettering of the title in place. Based on these proofs, the scratched

40. A less likely scenario is that it was made prior to etching to denote the intended subject for the plate. No other example of such an inscription is evident in the copperplates after Blake's preparatory drawings.

inscription would most likely have been made after the initial etching stage. The first proof allowed the engraver to check his work against the original drawing before finishing the effigies and adding the border and letters. Blake's preparatory sketches of Richard and Anne were, according to Malkin, "among his first studies" and were part of the initial tranche of drawings (c. 1774–75) comprising the monuments in the chapel of Edward the Confessor.⁴¹ After he drew these tombs, he moved to the area before the high altar to record the wall paintings and monuments that were revealed when the wainscot and tapestries were removed in 1775.⁴² The existence of the two proof states and the inscription suggests an apprentice carefully checking his

41. For Malkin, see *BR(2)* 563. Blake made four sketches of the monument of Richard and Anne, including two oval portraits from the effigies (Bodleian Library, Gough Maps 225, ff. 211-13, 215). For the dating of these drawings, see Crosby, "The Gothic Artist."

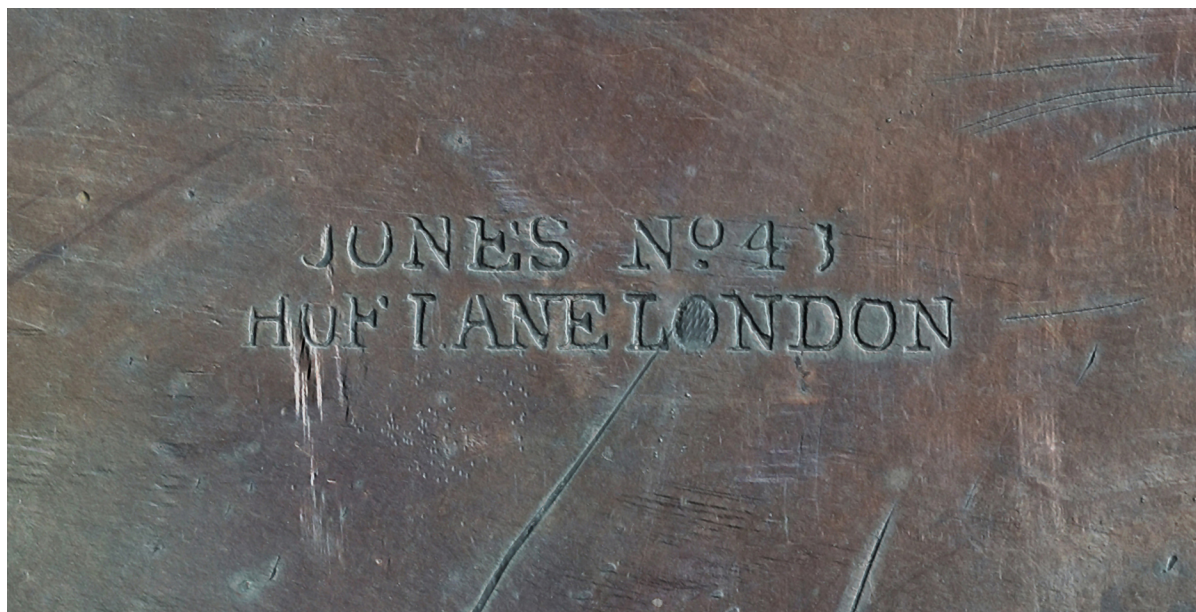
42. As documented in Joseph Ayloffe, *An Account of Some Ancient Monuments in Westminster Abbey ... Read at the Society of Antiquaries March 12, 1778* (London: J. Nichols, 1780) 1.



28. Proof impressions of the monument of Richard II and Queen Anne (side view). Gough Maps 228, ff. 190-91. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

work during the etching process. As Blake was responsible for the drawing of Richard and Anne's tomb, he may have been, if we believe Malkin, the engraver of the etching on

the recto of this plate. If so, then he was likely also behind the scratched inscription and the other incised markings on the verso.



29. Copperplate of Richard II and Queen Anne, magnified detail of the verso, showing the platemaker's mark. Gough Copperplate d. 109. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

- 17 Some small areas of hatching, most notably in the first O of "London" on the platemaker's mark stamped in the center, appear on this verso (illus. 29).⁴³ The O is 1.5 mm. in diameter and contains tightly hatched lines 50 microns deep created with a sharp-tipped burin. Incising lines in confined spaces allowed practice with engraving tools in a controlled way. These marks are also suggestive of an apprentice practicing patterns spontaneously and playfully. Such playfulness is further hinted at by two incised motifs, the first of which is a short-shafted arrow or dart with extensive fletching and a triangular tip (illus. 30). Approximately 18 mm. in length, the lines have been incised to a depth of 350-80 microns. The lower area of fletching is flat, indicating that a burin with a straight end at the tip was used. Arrows or darts are a recurring pictorial and textual element in Blake's work.⁴⁴ If he produced the incised markings on the verso of

this plate, then the arrow may be considered one of the earliest documented instances of this motif.

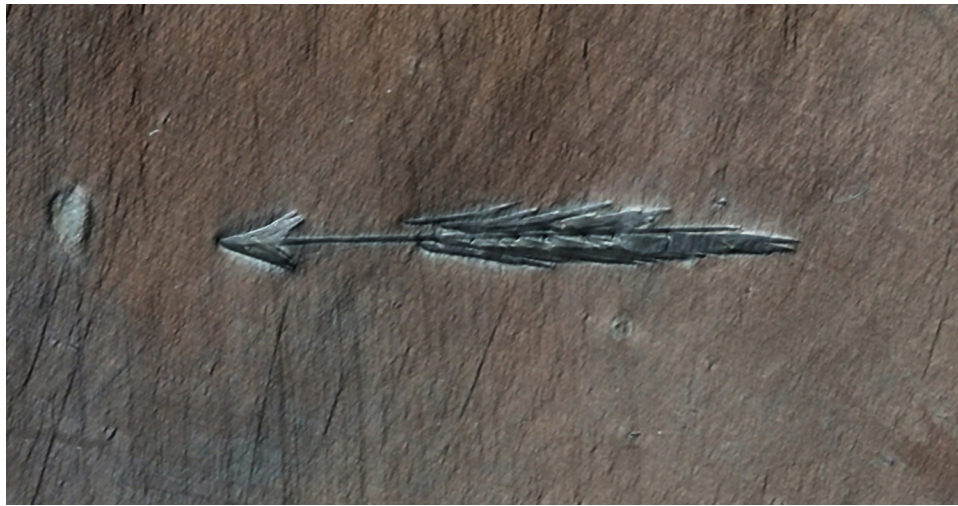
flaming dart, and *The Rout of the Rebel Angels*, in which the Son draws back a large bow armed with seven arrows. In his watercolor designs for *Night Thoughts*, Blake depicts Christ armed with a bow, drawing an arrow from a quiver (Night VII, p. 53); the figure of Death with short-shafted arrows or darts (see Night I, p. 15, which he engraved for the 1797 edition; Night V, pp. 38, 45, 47, 51); and a bearded soldier with a spear (Night IX, p. 63).

He incorporated arrows or arrow-headed darts in other engravings after his own designs, such as "My Son! my Son!" from the emblem book *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (1793), which shows a male youth raising a dart at a bearded older male, and two illustrations for Hayley's 1802 ballad "The Lion."

Arrows appear frequently in Blake's poetry, including some of his most famous lines—"Bring me my Bow of burning gold: / Bring me my Arrows of desire" (E 95)—and one of his earliest poems, "A War Song to Englishmen" from *Poetical Sketches*: "The arrows of Almighty God are drawn!" (E 440). According to the advertisement for *Poetical Sketches*, Blake "commenced" the poems and dramatic fragments in his "twelfth" year and "occasionally resumed" work on them "till his twentieth year," indicating that some composition occurred during his apprenticeship. "A War Song to Englishmen" was probably intended to be included in the dramatic fragment "King Edward the Third." Blake made three sketches of the effigy of Edward III in the chapel of the Confessor between 1774 and 1777, including a large oval portrait (Bodleian Library, Gough Maps 225, ff. 202-04).

43. While some of the copperplates bear the platemaker's stamp, they are all undated. For copperplate suppliers during Blake's time, see G. E. Bentley, Jr., "Blake's Heavy Metal: The History, Weight, Uses, Cost, and Makers of His Copper Plates," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 76.2 (spring 2007): 714-70; and Sung, chap. 4.

44. They feature in two watercolors illustrating episodes from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1807): *Satan, Sin, and Death: Satan Comes to the Gates of Hell*, in which Satan is confronted by his son, Death, wielding a



30. Copperplate of Richard II and Queen Anne, magnified detail of the verso, showing arrow. Gough Copperplate d. 109. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.



31. Copperplate of Richard II and Queen Anne, magnified detail of the verso, showing tiny face. Gough Copperplate d. 109. ARCHiOx / © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The short double arcs that form the upper lids of both eyes are suggestive of the almond eye shape that we see in Blake's self-portrait and in his 1810 tempera *Adam Naming the Beasts*. All three portraits also convey a degree of intensity, with eyes framed by arched eyebrows staring directly at the viewer. I am indebted to Robert N. Essick for this observation.

18 The second motif is almost impossible to see with the naked eye because of substantial *repoussage*. Selene revealed two drypoint lines, 30-40 microns in depth, that run across the verso of the plate as a guide for the *repoussage*. Either side of these lines is a series of curved incisions or arcs,⁴⁵ the tapered ends of which indicate that they were made with a burin. Hidden among this cluster of lines and *repoussage* is a miniature face approximately 18 mm. high, with uniform line depths of 100 microns (illus. 31). The face is a simplistic representation, delineated with the patterns familiar from the versos of these plates: for instance, three curved lines above the eyes denote eyelids and eyebrows, with an area of cross-hatching above the right eye, between the second and third lines. Hatched lines, consistently 92 microns deep, depict the right eye, while cross-hatching, consistently 96 microns deep, represents the left; the use of hatching for one and cross-hatching for the other imbues the face with an expressive character. Around the nose there is considerable cross-hatching,⁴⁶ averaging 95 microns in depth; beneath the nose, three slightly curved lines denote an upper lip or closed lips. Below, at least two shorter, shallower lines 40 microns deep, as well as a third, slightly longer line 90 microns deep, may represent the bottom lip or chin. *Repoussage* covers and distorts much of the nose, indicating that the face was incised first and therefore before the recto of the plate was finished. Unlike the more finished oval portraits, the miniature face does not represent a specific model or individual; the lack of a continuous circle around the features reveals that the curved lines preceded the face, which was possibly added as a doodle by a young apprentice. Its minute size, like the hatched O of London in the platemaker's mark, indicates an engraver capable of working in a controlled manner at a minuscule scale, possibly with the aid of magnification.⁴⁷

45. There are overlapping arcs 17.5 and 10 mm. in length above the eyebrows, together with a curved line that extends to the right beyond the uppermost arc. A slightly offset arc 10 mm. in length is below the mouth area.

46. This is consistent with the equidistant cross-hatching around the nose areas in the six oval portraits and the "Joseph of Arimathea" print.

47. In four of his preparatory sketches in the abbey, Blake drew figures and faces on a similar scale as he copied the decorative features of the tombs of Aymer de Valence, John of Eltham, and Countess Aveline (Bodleian Library, Gough Maps 225, ff. 54, 146, 156, 157).

He often employed pen-and-ink handwork in his illuminated books to delineate facial features, including those of the tiny figures that lounge among vegetation or populate interlinear areas, and at the turn of the nineteenth century he embarked on a brief career as a miniaturist under the guidance of his then-patron, William Hayley (see Crosby, "A Minute Skirmish: Blake, Hayley and the Art of Miniature Painting," *Blake and Conflict*, ed. Sarah Haggarty and Jon Mee [Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009] 164-84; and "William Blake's Miniature Portraits of the Butts Family," *Blake* 42.4 [spring 2009]: 147-52).

Conclusion

19 Incised markings on the versos of these three copperplates suggest that an apprentice engraver initially used the plates as practice spaces to learn and hone the linear patterns of his profession. The plates were then reused to etch images after Blake's preparatory drawings to illustrate Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments*. Was the apprentice who made the preparatory drawings also responsible for the practice work? The evidence presented above encourages the tentative attribution of the markings on the versos to Blake. It is important to note, however, that they could have been the work of one or more of Basire's other apprentices, or Basire himself.⁴⁸ Copper was expensive, so utilizing the versos of plates to train apprentices prior to etching the rectos was likely encouraged. Because of that expense, an engraving studio such as Basire's would buy copper from a platemaker when it was required for specific commissions, which reduces the possibility that the markings pre-date the period of Blake's apprenticeship.⁴⁹ We know that Blake began sketching in Westminster Abbey in 1774 and, according to Malkin, engraved some of his drawings, "especially in winter." Before he could engrave the drawings, he needed to practice the techniques of line engraving.

20 The work on the verso of the three abbots plate is methodical and structured, with specific areas dedicated to different hatching systems, curved lines, circles, and semicircles. The area of dense cross-hatching on the verso of the plate with the tombs of Aymer de Valence and John of Eltham likewise reveals an apprentice deliberately practicing one of the foundational techniques of line engraving, while the nearby fletching seems to be a more spontaneous attempt at a specific motif. Playful designs (or motifs) on the verso of the copperplate depicting the monument of Richard II and Queen Anne are also indicative of an apprentice; the miniature face appears to be a doodle that was, to quote Blake's own phrase, drawn "on Copper" (E 574). The engraver who incised the markings on the versos of these plates did so not with the intention that the shapes, patterns, and motifs would be printed. The repetition on the three abbots plate gestures to the nature of reproductive engraving, which uses a series of repeating linear patterns to reproduce accurately an original image. In the case of the arrow and the tiny face on the Richard and Anne plate, the minute scale is

48. It is improbable, although perhaps not impossible, that a master engraver such as Basire would have needed to spend time practicing basic patterns.

49. For the cost of copperplates, see note 43. It is likely that Basire's studio would also have scraped and polished the surface of already etched plates so that they could be reused. On Blake's preparation of copperplates for etching, see Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 47-49.

suggestive of private and personal art created to experiment with motifs or for amusement during the long hours of an apprentice's day. If this is the work of a young Blake refining his craft, the versos of these copperplates grant us access to a privileged space that sheds light on how an eighteenth-century apprentice learned the techniques of his profession. The doodles reveal more personal, intimate moments that were not meant to be seen by anyone other than the artist. For the first time since they were made, we can now see the practice work and doodling of an apprentice responsible for, among other things, the tiny visionary face that emerges from the copperplate to return our gaze across two and half centuries.