

Sapwood: friend or foe?

Sapwood is familiar to all lovers of old furniture as a source of problems: it is soft, liable to damage and attracts woodworm. Yet, for dendrochronologists, the presence of sapwood rings is valued since it reduces (or, when bark is present, removes) the need for estimation, leading to the paradox that the most accurate estimates of the felling date of timber are possible when all the sapwood rings are present.

This raises the question of whether when sapwood is found in furniture it is an example of bad practice or normal practice. As long ago as 1413 the 'York Memorandum Book' (of the York guild of joiners) contained the following statement:

the said members of the guild desire and entrust that all the aforesaid work or any work which they carry out shall be well and profitably made and executed without any sap wood or any other weakness under the above penalty¹

The question of how general guild rules concerning sapwood were and how far they were applied is a big one. Is the presence of sapwood in furniture due to joiners working outside guilds? Maurice Postan, the medieval economic historian, makes the shrewd observation that 'it is in the nature of regulation and control to breed

¹ J. B. Morrell, *Woodwork in York*, Batsford, London, 1952, p. 23.

documentary evidence and thus to perpetuate itself in history out of all proportion to its real importance in historical development.’²

The presence of sapwood is a valuable record of workshop practices and, rather than being dismissed as poor workmanship, deserves to be recorded by furniture researchers and dendrochronologists. It may help throw light on the role of guilds and more generally on the extent of regulated and unregulated furniture-making.

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² M. M. Postan, 'The trade of medieval Europe in the North', in M. M. Postan and E. Miller (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol. 2, *Trade and industry in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn, CUP, 1987, p. 271.