

THE CHAPEL ON BLAKENEY EYE : SOME DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

By John Wright

On the north-east corner of Blakeney Eye is a low earthwork containing slight traces of flint walling which suggests that a building once stood there. This site has long been known as 'the ruined chapel', but on what evidence? This article outlines what is known about the site from documentary sources. The BAHS has recently carried out some detailed surveys of these ruins and the initial results are described in a separate article in this issue of the Journal.

The Site

A seabank extending in semi-circular fashion from Blakeney round to Cley encloses not only an area of fresh marsh but also a sandy island, or *eye*, which stands several feet above the general level of the marsh. It is on this eye that the chapel stands.

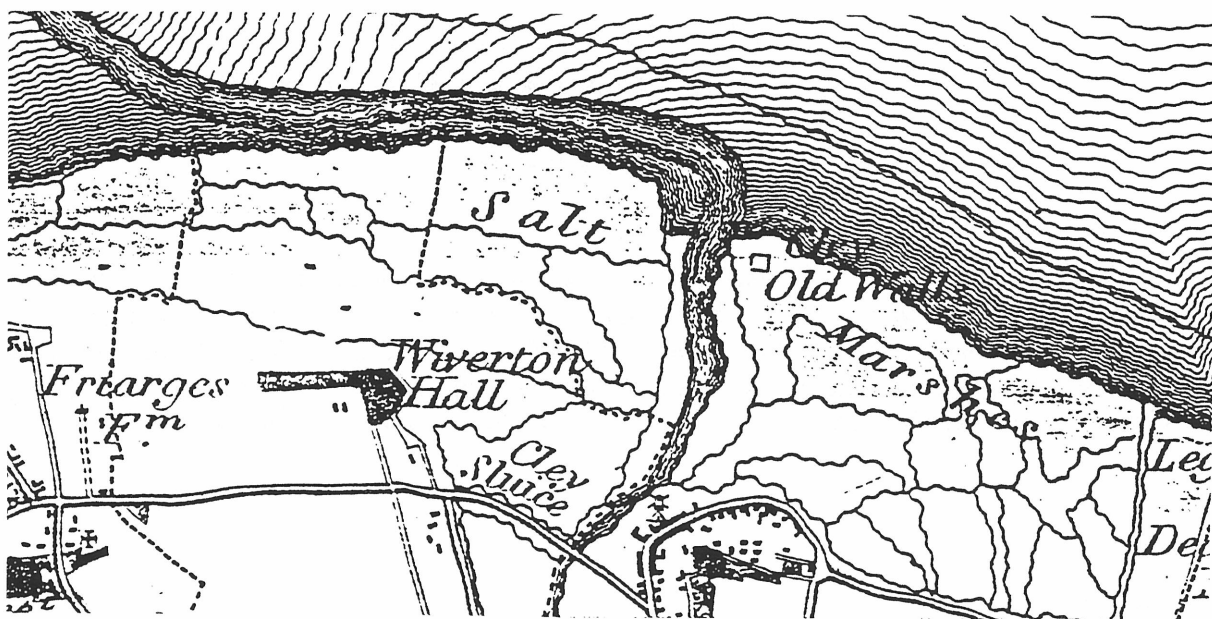
Immediately to the east of Blakeney Eye is the river Glaven, which also hugs the north side of the Eye in a channel specially cut in 1922. On the eastern side of the river, almost as a mirror image, lies another eye occupying the north-west corner of the enclosed fresh marshes fronting Cley and Salthouse. This eye, too, has had buildings on it in the past.

The Blakeney fresh marshes are divided between the three parishes of Blakeney, Cley and Wiveton, with Blakeney having only the smallest and most westerly section of the marsh. The southern part of the remainder lies in Wiveton and the northern part, including the whole of 'Blakeney' Eye, forms part of the parish of Cley. Whatever the reason for this anomalous name, it is a convenient way of distinguishing this eye from Cley Eye lying to the east of the Glaven.

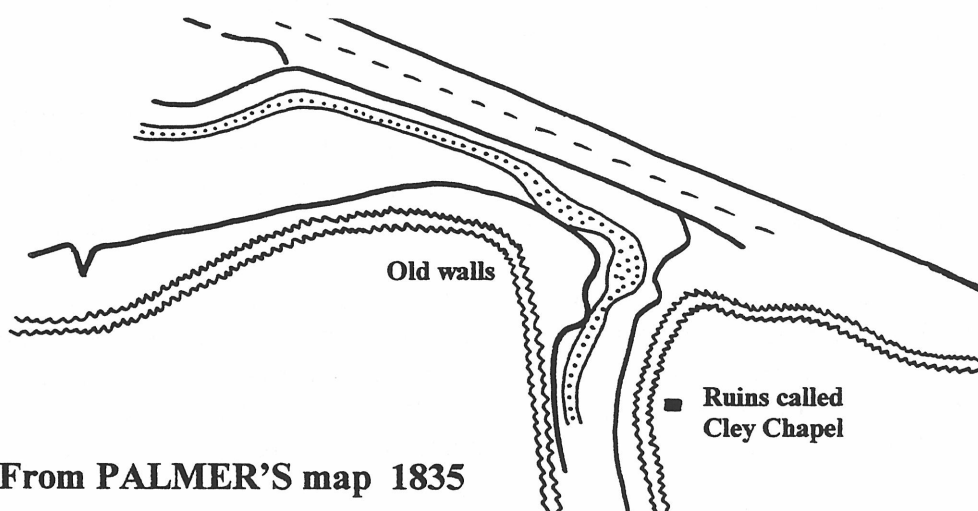
The Building

The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) maintained by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit at Gressenhall contains information about thousands of archaeological sites in the County. One of the entries for the chapel on the Eye reads:

The remains of Blakeney Chapel are situated on a low natural rise in an area of undulating rough pasture. An extant section of flint and mortar wall c. 6m long and c.0.3m high forms part of a rectangular structure that is otherwise outlined as a turf mark over footings. This structure is oriented E – W and measures c. 18m by 7m, with no trace of sub-divisions in the pastured interior. Contiguous on the southern side is a smaller rectangular structure again outlined as a turf mark and measuring overall c. 13m by 5m. There is no remaining ground evidence that this was a chapel.



From BRYANT'S map 1838 (enlarged)



From PALMER'S map 1835



From FADEN'S map 1797 (enlarged)

No tradition of dedication is known of locally, and no information obtained from Norfolk Record Office other than the depiction of a complete roofed (but un-named) structure at this site on a map of 1586.

The only additional observation that which might add materially to this description is that in 1976 a possible wall running southwards from the building for a distance of c.25m was seen by local residents as a parch mark in the grass, although there is no record of this in the SMR.

Maps

Current **Ordnance Survey** maps show the site of *Blakeney Chapel*. For comparison with earlier maps it is worth noting that the distance from the seabank immediately north of the chapel to the low water mark on the beach is about 195 metres – perhaps a little less by now as the beach continues to move landwards.

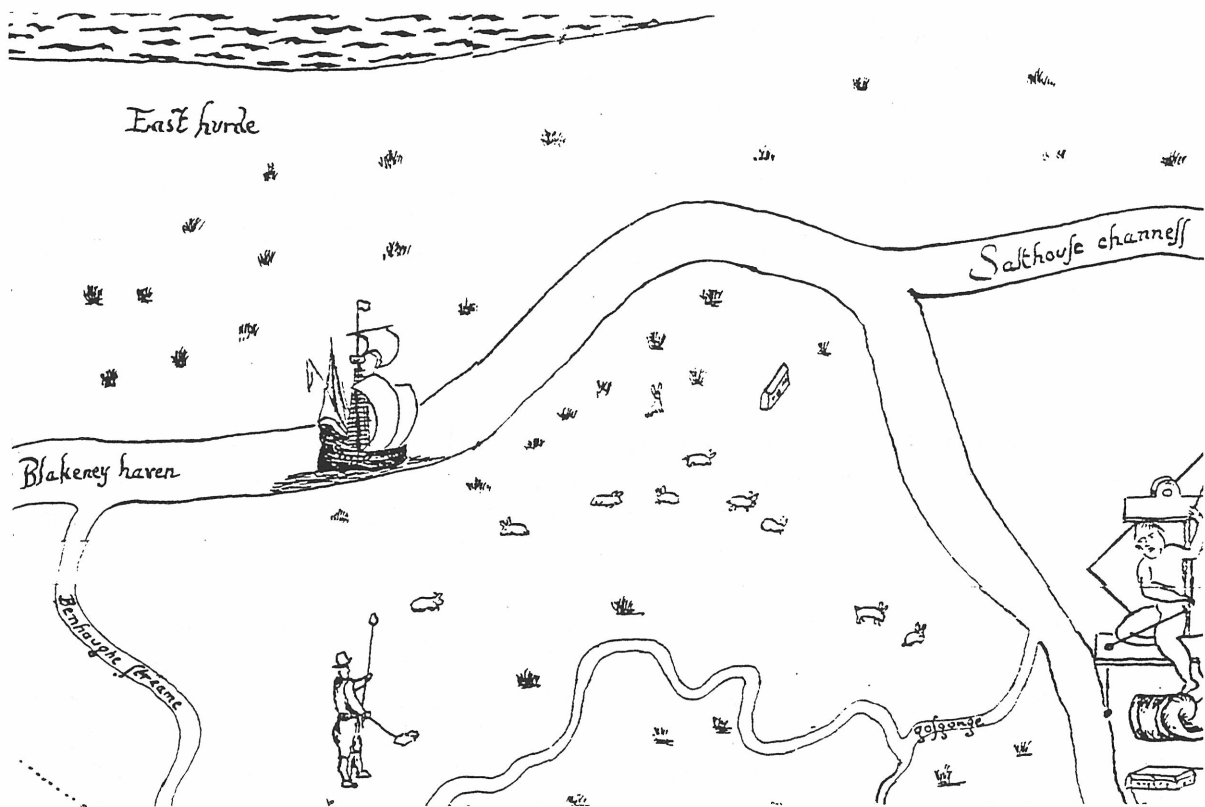
The chapel site has long been shown on large-scale maps produced by the Ordnance Survey including, for example, the **6 inch to 1 mile, 1907**, (sheet IV SE). At this time the ruins were called *Blakeney Chapel (Remains of)*, and *Chapel Hole* denoted a particular part of the tidal channel just to the east. The shortest distance from the marsh bank to the low water line on the seaward side of the beach is approximately 275 metres. A spot height of 20 ft on the chapel is higher than nearby spot heights on the bank, and to the south of the chapel lies a small area defined as rough ground. Just to the east of the Glaven, on the south-west corner of Cley Eye, is shown another Chapel: *Cley Chapel (Site of)*.

As Blakeney Eye is in Cley it is relevant to look at the Tithe Map (1838) and the two Enclosure maps (1812 and 1824) for that parish, but none of them contains any reference to a building or ruins on either of the two Eyes.

OS published its first 1 inch to 1 mile map of the County in 1838, the same year as the 1.22 inches to 1 mile map produced by **Bryant, 1838**. This map is the first to show parish boundaries but does not enjoy a good reputation for accuracy, which may be exemplified by the lack of any seabank from Blakeney to Cley and ‘salt marshes’ appearing in the area known to be enclosed fresh marsh at the time. No building is shown on Blakeney Eye but one is marked on Cley Eye, accompanied by the name *Cley Old Walls*.

Two maps from the early nineteenth century do suggest the presence of a building on the corner of Blakeney Eye. The one by **Palmer, 1835**,¹ shows the whole of Blakeney Haven in nautical style, with soundings at sea, a scale in cables, and many harbour beacons. In the vicinity of the chapel is written *Old Walls* and it would be reasonable to regard this as applicable to the building whose remnants are visible today. A building is shown on Cley Eye and by it the words *Ruins called Cley Chapel*. Taking a cable as 100 fathoms, the distance from seabank to low water line is shown as approximately 320 metres.

The map by **Benjamin Leak, 1817**,² covers the same general area but shows just the main channels. The plan includes Blakeney Eye although a mark in the place occupied by the chapel may be fortuitous rather than the depiction of an actual building. Just to the south of this mark is written *The Old Wall* which no doubt relates to the same feature as Palmer’s map. It appears from the plan that the distance from the bank to the seaward low water mark was then roughly 400 metres.



From the 1586 map (tracing of one of the copies)



From CRANFIELD'S map 1769 (from the coloured original)

The first large-scale map of Norfolk was published by **Faden, 1797**, to a scale of 1 inch to 1 mile. The surveys were conducted by Donald and Milne over the period 1790-95. The Blakeney/Cley embankment is shown and it is noted that the marshes are 'drained'. In the expected place on Blakeney Eye is marked a building and the name *Chapel Ruins*, and on the southern margin of Cley Eye, close by the present roadway and in the same position as on the 1907 OS map, is marked another building and the words *Cley Chapel Ruins*.

A few years before Faden's map was published, local mapmakers **William and Corba Cranefield, 1769**, produced a plan of Blakeney parish to the scale of 20 inches to 1 mile. This map is in private ownership but a tracing of it (not entirely complete) is in the Norfolk Record Office.³ Comparison with modern maps shows that roads and field boundaries were quite accurately drawn. Blakeney Eye is described as a sheepwalk but the northern part of it is labelled 'furze' [gorse]. In the north-east corner is drawn, by means of dots and in plan form, a two-celled building, with the northern part larger than the southern. Beside the building are written the words *Eye House*. The shape and dimensions are essentially as now seen on site. The dots almost certainly indicate a ruin for all others in the parish are depicted in three dimensions as actual buildings.

Opposite this building, on the other side of the Glaven channel and in the extreme corner of the map, is drawn another ruin in the form of one large square with a much smaller one on its eastern side, but no name is present. It is difficult to know for certain whether the building was actually on Cley Eye; use of the map scale would place the structure on the east side of the present tidal channel but on the seaward side of the present embankment. It is doubtful whether that would be its true location – or at least that would be the reasonable assumption were it not for Peter Catling's sketch, 1951. This shows building remains ('stone walls and brick floor') on the seaward side of Cley bank in the vicinity of the building on the Cranefield's map. Catling's observations, reproduced by Jonathan Hooton in his book *The Glaven Ports*, need some further investigation.

Because of the marginal location and also because the plan appears to be drawn as if at high water, it is not possible to say how far the seabank is from the seaward low water mark.

There appear to be no earlier large-scale maps of Blakeney in the 1700s, but in 1693 Greenville Collins, a local man who became Hydrographer to the King, published a *Coasting Pilot* in which appears a chart of Blakeney Haven. However, the landward margins are very generalised and Blakeney Eye cannot be identified.

A plan of Salthouse marshes prepared by John Hunt in 1649 shows the embankments and channels, which can be identified with features on current maps. Unfortunately, the map does not extend westward to cover the Blakeney and Cley Eyes.

The earliest map of all for this area is the well-known **1586 map of Blakeney Haven** which is the subject of a separate article in this issue of the Journal and another in the previous issue. This map is drawn to a specified scale and as far as can be ascertained the channels that comprise the haven are accurately drawn by the standards of the time. The villages, however, are probably shown in more generalised fashion as they were not relevant to the issue for which the map was prepared (a dispute between the manors of Wighton and Cley over right of wreck).

This map shows Blakeney Eye covered with rabbits (not sheep as on Morston salt marshes) and gives it the name *Thornham's Eye*. Drawn on it, in the north-east quarter though not in the extreme corner, is a building notable for being shown in the manner of all others on the map. Whilst the map shows no ruined buildings at all, and there might have been one or two in practice, the implication is surely that the building on the Eye was then substantially complete even if not actually inhabited or fully used. The form of the building is the same as others – there is no obvious distinction, for example, between domestic and agricultural uses. Churches, however, are clearly portrayed in pictorial form with some attempt to denote the particular characteristics of individual buildings.

If the copies of the lost original are accurate, the buildings exhibit some variety within a general pattern. All are shown as single storey, to judge from the windows, though some, including for example a few along the waterfront at Cley, are taller than the rest. The usual pattern for each frontage (the visible long side) is a central door with a window either side, but there are variations: the Eye house (not named on the map) is one of the few with three windows, and only one (at the Friary) has four. There is nothing regimental about the layout of the houses, some are detached, others are joined but rarely as straight terraces – more usually one is set at an angle to the adjoining one. This seems improbable architecturally, so maybe the intention is to indicate farm buildings – or perhaps it was an aesthetically pleasing way to show the organic nature of the settlements.

The implication for the Eye house is that it may have been bigger than most, although it may have expanded because there was plenty of room on the map at this point. Showing it as a single rectangular building may be a factual statement but this portrayal does not rule out the possibility of a smaller building (or a large extension) alongside. It may be relevant that the building is shown in a roughly east-west alignment, as it now is, although the cartographer seems to have had a distaste for showing buildings face-on with gable ends invisible.

On the painting of the map prepared by Godfrey Sayers from the two nineteenth-century copies (and used to illustrate the cover of *The Glaven Ports* by Jonathan Hooton) all roofs are coloured red as if to indicate tiling, and all churches are roofed in slate-coloured grey. These may well be the colours on the lost original but even so this is probably just a convention and does not imply an absence of thatch, for instance. It cannot be assumed, therefore, that the Eye house was necessarily tiled.

No earlier maps of the Blakeney/Cley area are known, but mention should be made of the many small-scale county maps published from the late 1500s onwards. On these, villages are denoted by symbols and there is no room for individual houses. Later and larger maps, such as Morden's, had a mixture of symbols and miniature village plans, but none that have been seen show any separate building in the vicinity of the Eye. One interesting feature, however, is that many of the early maps (Saxton, Speed, Blaeu) show the river Glaven flowing due north to the sea so that Blakeney Point is an island after the fashion of Scolt Head. Whilst it is possible that the occasional storm tide did breach the shingle ridge in this way, it is unlikely that it remained open for so long. It is much more likely that one cartographer took much of the content of his map from that of a predecessor.

Documents

Published books are a form of documentation but their contents are not necessarily reliable. Authors who mention Blakeney Chapel cannot be expected to carry out extensive research in order to discover whether the Chapel actually was a chapel: it is enough that OS maps say so. Some books provide interesting detail about the operation of the chapel. An anonymous booklet on Blakeney published in 1929, for instance, says that:

There existed a chapel of ease on the marshes served by a friar from the Convent. It was here that vessels going out to sea were blessed, and mariners and fishermen would put thank offerings into an iron box fixed to the outside of the building for the success of their voyage.

What is the source for such statements? A search of all the principal published calendars (summaries) of medieval state records (the Rolls series) has produced only one reference which might possibly have a bearing on the Eye building. It comes from the **Calendar of Patent Rolls** and is dated **20 April 1343**:

Protection with clause rogamus for two years, for Robert de Berton Benedich, chaplain, and hermit of Cleye by Blakeneye Havene by the Sea, who has not whereof to live unless relieved by the faithful, going to divers parts of the realms to seek for alms.

This has sometimes been interpreted as Robert's permission to seek alms from those leaving Blakeney haven. Taking account of the punctuation in the published calendar, however, it seems clear that it is Robert who has asked to go about the country seeking alms from the faithful. He is described as a hermit of Cley and could have had a cell somewhere in the parish. The summary does not imply that any such cell was by the harbour, only that the Cley in question is the one next to Blakeney haven and not any other. This is therefore a very enigmatic reference soon after the establishment of the friary at Blakeney some time between 1304 and 1316 (the date of 1296 often quoted is probably a mistaken one).

To date, no further references of any relevance have been found in the state records until **1529-32** when the **Calendar of Early Chancery Proceedings**⁴ includes the following:

Rauff Symonds of Cley (pl) v Nicholas Childe clerk (def) re detention of deeds of land called East Gye and a house built thereon.

The actual document in the Public Record Office at Kew, after the spelling has been modernised, starts as follows:

In most humble wise complaineth and showeth unto your good lordship your daily orator Rauff Symonds of Cley next the sea within the county of Norfolk where William Dalle of the same town now do [?dwell] was seized of and in one piece of land called the East Eye lying in the town of Cley aforesaid together with one house edified upon the said ground and pasture in his demesne

This appears to mean that there was then a building on Cley East Eye, but this is not the Eye that lies west of the Glaven and is therefore not 'Blakeney chapel'.

The first written reference so far known to a building on Blakeney Eye actually post-dates the 1586 map. It is not an original document but is a reference to one in Blomefield's History of Norfolk.⁵ He says there that:

Sir Christopher Heydon, in the 38th of Elizabeth, by deed, demised to James Calthorpe, Esq. an old house called the decayed chapel of Cley, with a piece of marsh and a fir ground, called Thornham Eye, wherein the chapel stood, butting on Cley channel to the east, and Blakeney channel to the west, between Cley common and the channel on the north, and Wiveton and Blakeney marsh south, excepting wreck of the sea, herring fishery etc.

This deed of 1595/96 refers specifically to a decayed chapel on Blakeney Eye at a time when its operation might almost have been within living memory, so there is no particular reason to be suspicious of the description. The use of the word 'decayed', however, makes an interesting comparison with the portrayal of the building on the 1586 map. This deed reference also appears in the Frere manuscripts in Norfolk Record Office where the wording is slightly different and includes a specific date, 22 January 1596.

A deed of 1621⁶ records that James Hobart sold to Robert Beales of Cley all his manors of Cley and Blakeney, the foldcourse and sheep pasture in Cley, and various properties in the occupation of named tenants. Excepted from the sale, however, were certain farm lands and:

all that marsh or pasture commonly called Thorneham's Eye with 'an oulde house or chappell thereupon built' between the haven and common channel of Cley on the part of the north and the marsh of Wiveton and Blakeney towards the south and abutting on the common channel of Cley towards the east and the common channel of Blakeney alias Snitterley towards the west now or late in the occupation of Peter Bishopp

Only 25 years after the Heydon-Calthorpe deed, the chapel has now become an old house 'or' chapel.

Included in a deed of 1651,⁷ a marriage settlement between Simon Britiffe and Hester Harbord, is much topographical detail about Cley marshes. This time the excepted lands include:

all that piece of high marsh ground called Foulness Eye als East Eye of threescore and 10 acres with 'one Lodge or a house thereupon built' between the late imbanked marsh of Simon Britiffe and abuttalled on South and [sic] the creeke called Salthouse Cha[nnel] on part of the North and abutting on a creek called Cley Channel towards the West and also the 'West' [inserted] part of the late imbanked marsh of Cley

The house on the Eye is no doubt the same as, or the successor to, the one in the petition of 1529-32. The deed is also of interest in equating East Eye with Foulness Eye and placing the area next to Cley Channel – there are other documents which just mention Foulness without giving a location for it.

No attempt has been made to search for later deeds but the name Thornham's Eye is worth noting – why the name? It may be of relevance that a family of that name lived in Blakeney either side of 1500. Edmund Thornham's will of 1485⁸ refers to his sons Thomas, John, who is to have lands in five local parishes (but excluding Cley), and James, who is to supply sheep, cattle, wheat and barley malt to the widow. There is reference to a shop in Bingham marketstead but no reference to the Eye. James Thornham's will of 1540⁹ suggests that he is a husbandman with cattle and sheep but it does not describe his land holdings.

Conclusion

The notes in this article cover the material that is easily available. More may yet be found after further search. In the meantime, the existing map and documentary evidence needs to be considered in relation to the findings of the field surveys carried out by the Society. The indications to date are that the building probably was a chapel but it is significant that no document has been found dating from the time that it was actually in use. Its possible function and method of operation need to be considered, perhaps looking at parallels elsewhere. The evidence for a chapel on Cley Eye, however, is much more tenuous: the references on maps from Faden (1797) onwards are not supported by any known documentary evidence. This building also needs some further investigation.

Finally, it is worth noting that the late Kenneth Allen, a distinguished historian of the Glaven villages, who collected much material but published little, said (of Blakeney Chapel) in his talk to the Blakeney W.I.¹⁰ :

I am surprised that I have found no reference to this chapel in relation to Blakeney and Cley churches or the Friary, nor any bequests to it in the many wills that I have looked at. I am inclined to think that it was a shepherd's house or cow house perhaps with a shrine on the outside I suspend judgement.

It is the intention of the Society to reach a conclusion on the basis of more evidence than was available to Kenneth Allen.

John Wright is a retired town planner who has long been interested in local history.

Notes

- 1 Norfolk Record Office (NRO) MC.106.28.10.
- 2 NRO MC.106.28.3.
- 3 NRO BL 49/1.
- 4 Public Record Office C.1/679/58.
- 5 Blomefield's History of Norfolk, Vol IX, published by C.Parkin, 1808.
Francis Blomefield died in 1752 before completing all his volumes on the county. Much of his material passed to Parkin, the rest was dispersed and eventually became the Frere Manuscripts now held in the NRO.
- 6 NRO NRS 23771 Z108.
- 7 NRO NRS 23095 Z89.
- 8 NRO A/D will MF 502/250.
- 9 NRO A/D will Aleyn 95.
- 10 NRO MC.106.23 (p.7).