

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXI

1981

IMRAY LAURIE NORIE AND WILSON

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ROMANO-BRITISH SALT PRODUCTION ON THE WESTERN FEN-EDGE: A RE-ASSESSMENT

DAVID GURNEY

Introduction

The collections of Peterborough Museum include several boxes labelled "Roman salt-panning equipment". Many of these finds come from sites referred to in gazetteers of saltern material (Hallam 1960, Phillips 1970), giving the impression that a number of possible salterns exist in the Peterborough area. This re-examination suggests that these are not saltern finds, and argues against the presence of a salt industry along the western fen-edge in the Romano-British period.

The Sites

The locations of these sites are shown in Figure 1. Sites mentioned in the gazetteers but without finds in Peterborough Museum are also included (sites 2, 5, 11). (*For figures see after p. 84*)

SITE 1. ST GUTHLAC'S CELL, CROWLAND (LINCS) TF 251109

Thirteen firebar fragments, marked "Crowland 5000". Six are square in section, six rectangular, and one cigar-shaped with one flattened surface. They may have either slightly splayed or tapered ends. Four are illustrated (Fig. 2, Nos. 2-5). The associated finds are three pieces of horn, one piece of fossil deerhorn, one piece of Roman tile, and five sherds of Roman pottery. These were found by A. S. Canham and J. W. Bodger.

References: Irvine n.d. Irvine 1889 Phillips 1970,275

SITE 2. SINGLESOLE FARM, EYE TF 253070

Finds of "wedge-shaped bricks" on a ploughed field are recorded.

References: Irvine n.d. Irvine 1889 Hallam 1960,73 Phillips 1970,274

SITE 3. THE REACHES, EYE TF 245047

Seven supports or "handbricks" (acc. no. L109/L109A) of South Lincolnshire type, with characteristic finger and thumb impressions. Heights vary from 60mm to 125mm, and the largest stem diameter is c. 75mm. Four are illustrated - Fig. 3, Nos. 6-8 and Fig. 4; No. 11. Hallam incorrectly gives the provenance of these finds as TF 253070.

References: Hallam 1960,72 Phillips 1970,273.

SITE 4. NORTHAM QUARRY, EYE TF 230032

Two firebar fragments and three support fragments. One firebar is 30mm x 30mm in section with a splayed end and a minimum length of 110mm. The other is 24mm x 28mm in section, tapering slightly, with a minimum length of 55mm. The three supports have flat prominently splayed bases rising to a rounded ridge with a slightly upturned end. The largest is 75mm tall, with a minimum length of 60mm. One is illustrated - Fig. 4, No. 10. The associated finds are 23 pieces of bone (marked "P.R.") two pieces of flint, and 16 pottery sherds of probable Roman date. These were found by Samuel Egar in 1888.

SITE 5. TANHOLT FARM, EYE TF 233023

Ploughing in 1951 exposed flue-like features of indeterminate function. Fieldwalking on this site in 1979/80 has produced no saltern finds.

References: Hallam 1960,73 Phillips 1970 273

SITE 6. PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL TL 19429866

Eight firebar fragments and one fragment of a fired clay slab (25mm thick). Seven of the firebars are square in section. The largest is 41mm x 41mm in section, and the longest has a minimum length of 148mm. One is illustrated - Fig. 4, No. 9. The remaining firebar is 30mm x 37mm in section, with a minimum length of 94mm. There are six associated pottery sherds; one is modern, and the other five are

Roman (acc. nos. 33/54/1-2). These were found in 1889 by J. W. Bodger in an east-west ditch running under the west wall of the north transept.

References: Irvine n.d. Irvine 1889 Hallam 1960,73 RCHM 1969,3 Phillips 1970,184

SITE 7. ALWALTON

One firebar fragment (acc. no. L107) 50mm x 50mm in section, with a minimum length of 300mm. This find is marked "Alwalton 1.5.26" and "Presented by Bailey".

SITE 8. LONDON BRICK CO. NO. 4 YARD, WOODSTON c.TL 185960

One firebar fragment (Fig. 2, No. 1), described on a contemporary label as a "Brick Tent Peg". It was found in 1884 by J. T. Irvine.

References: Irvine n.d. Irvine 1889 RCHM 1969,36 Phillips 1970,183

SITE 9. LONDON BRICK CO. NO. 1 YARD, FLETTON c.TL 198965

Two firebar fragments. One is 48mm x 55mm in section, with a minimum length of 160mm, and the other is 42mm x 45mm in section with a minimum length of 146mm.

References: RCHM 1969,29 Phillips 1970,183.

SITE 10. STANGROUND NORTH TL 217982

One firebar fragment, 40mm x 48mm in section, with a minimum length of 132mm.

References: RCHM 1969,33 Phillips 1970,187

SITE 11. HORSEY TOLL, WHITTLESEY TL233954

The finds from this Romano-British site, excavated by Mr Eric Standen in 1957 are held by the Field Section of the Peterborough Museum Society. They consist of one fragment of hearth wall, four fragments of fired clay slabs, three small rim sherds from large calcite-gritted vessels, and 16 firebar fragments. The largest of these is 55mm x 60mm in section, and the longest has a minimum length of 150mm.

References: Hallam 1960,64n,65n,73 Phillips 1970,188

SITE 12. GLASSMOOR HOUSE, WHITTLESEY TL 284934

Two complete supports from a Romano-British site, found c. 1880, and presented by the Revd Peter Royston in 1906 (acc. nos. L108A and B). They are both 145mm tall, and possibly form a pair or part of a set. The top of each is c. 20 x 75mm in plan, rising up at each end, thereby forming a curved central hollow. The body of the support tapers slowly outwards towards the base, which splays out to the shape of an oval, truncated at each end, and with maximum dimensions of c. 80 x 105mm. These appear to be much larger examples of the support type represented by the fragments from Site 4.

References: Phillips 1970,187.

Unprovenanced Finds

Eight firebar fragments. In section, four are rectangular, three are roughly square, and one is cigar-shaped. The largest is 48mm x 48mm in section, with a minimum length of 220mm. One has a contemporary label which reads "Harrow Tine Brick, Peterborough. Presented by Miss Bristow 27.2.26". Her father, James Bristow presented material from Woodston to the Museum, so this may be from the same provenance.

Discussion

1. *The Finds*

As these finds come from a variety of sites and uncertain contexts, detailed fabric and colour descriptions will not be given. Most are in a hard well-fired fabric, with either chopped vegetable or shell inclusions. Nearly all of the associated finds appear to be of Roman date, and there is no evidence to suggest that any of the finds come from contexts of other than that period.

A) *Supports*. Only the "handbricks" from Site 3 can be confidently related to the salt production industry as these are common on Iron Age and Roman salterns in south Lincolnshire. (Hallam 1960, 39f), and at Ingoldmells they were found to act as supports for the large troughs known as "Swinerton dishes" (Swinerton 1932, 244-8 and figs. 7-8). It must be stressed however, that their presence on this site is not in itself evidence of salt production, and they may be from a site where salt was dried or traded, or where saltern equipment was manufactured.

The supports from Sites 4 and 12 are not certainly of saltern origin, and they may derive from another type of hearth, as suggested by Phillips (1970,187).

B) *Firebars*. Fifty-two firebar fragments were examined, and except where stated, all have rounded edges and taper slowly to a rounded point. Although firebars do occur on salterns in the area (Hallam 1960,40 and plate II), they are very uncommon, and do not appear to be a fundamental part of the equipment for salt-production. In the southern fens, firebars have not been found on saltern sites during extensive fieldwalking (pers. comm. D. Hall).

As firebars are not exclusively used in the salt industry, it would be unjustified to assume that the firebars here are from saltern sites. Six of the sites (1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12) have evidence of industrial activity other than salt-production. While there are similarities between the finds considered here and kiln bars from Water Newton (pers. comm. A. Challands) and possibly also at Stibbington and Sibson (Hartley 1972, 10,14) they are generally of a lighter construction and are not burnt to the degree usually found with local kiln bars. The use of these firebars in other types of hearth (e.g. bread ovens, corn-drying ovens) cannot be discounted.

It should also be noted that no trace of the vitrified yellow-green glaze-like surface deposit commonly found on saltern furniture is present on these finds.

2. *Salt-production in the Fens*

The earliest evidence for salt production in the fens comes from two sites near Peterborough, Fengate (Pryor 1980) and Northey (Gurney 1980), where finds of fired clay saltern furniture occur in early or middle Bronze Age contexts. These isolated finds are probably from fen-edge settlements where salt was dried or saltern equipment manufactured.

During the Iron Age, the southern fens appear to have been covered by a raised bog, while much of the northern fens was covered by a salt water lagoon (Hall forthcoming). Certain evidence of Iron Age salt production is limited to the sites found in south Lincolnshire (Simmons 1977).

The marine inundation which flooded the northern fens during the Iron Age deposited large areas of silt, and when a fall in sea level around the mid 1st C. A.D. left these silts dry, they became the focus of extensive settlement and saltern activity, as at Elm (Hall 1978).

During the 3rd C., increased seaward deposition appears to have led to a deterioration in drainage conditions. Increased flooding caused a shift to the higher silt areas, and by the 4th C., there is little evidence of occupation on the silts.

3. *The western fen-edge*

There is no structural evidence for Romano-British salt-production on the western fen-edge, and fieldwalking has failed to produce scatters of saltern material like those found in the southern fens and on the silts to the east (pers. comm. D. Hall).

It can be seen in Figure 1 that in north Cambridgeshire, certain salterns are known only along the eastern edge of the peat fen, on the junction of the fen and the silts in the Roman period. The sites considered here are all on the western edge of the peat fen, up to three miles from the eastern edge of the silts. While it seems possible that the silts would have been penetrated by narrow tidal channels during the Roman period, little salt water would have reached the far side of the peat fen. With fresh water draining down from the uplands as well, the water on the western fen-edge is unlikely to have been sufficiently saline to make salt extraction a viable economic activity.

The evidence for a salt industry on the western fen-edge rests solely upon the finds discussed above and with the exception of the "handbricks" from Site 3, none is of certain saltern origin. It seems unwarranted to suggest that along the western fen-edge in the Peterborough area, there existed a salt-production industry using firebars, in contrast to salterns in south Lincolnshire and to the sites on the silts only three or four miles to the east. The site 3 "handbricks" may represent an "inland" phase of the saltern industry – perhaps the manufacture of saltern furniture for use on the silts, or alternatively, the refinement of salt on the western fen-edge after initial extraction on the far side of the peat fen.

Conclusions

It has been suggested that the finds discussed here might derive from industrial activities other than than of salt-production. All confirmed saltern sites are on the silts on the eastern side of the peat fen, no structural evidence for saltern activity has been found on the western fen-edge sites, and there is an

absence of surface scatters of saltern material like those found on the silts. Furthermore, there are no certain saltern parallels for the finds discussed here, and they do not have the surface deposit which is a characteristic and reliable indicator of a saltern origin.

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I am particularly indebted to Martin Howe, curator of Peterborough Museum, who drew my attention to these finds and kindly agreed to further study and publication. Also to Adrian Challands, Peter Chowne, Tony Gregory, David Hall, Don Mackreth, Francis Pryor and Maisie Taylor for their help and advice on a variety of subjects.

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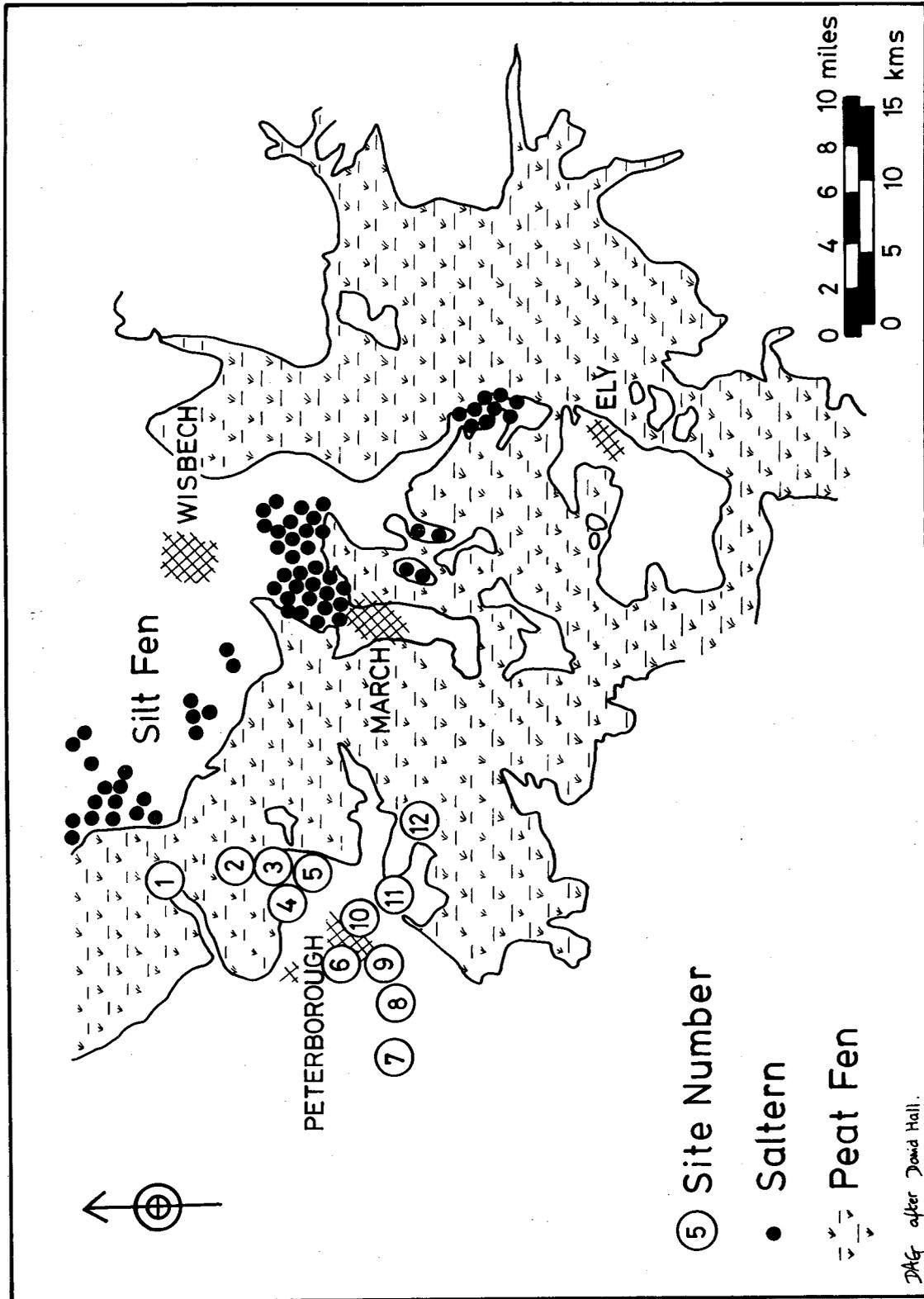


Fig. 1. Romano-British salt-production sites in the Fens

DAE after David Hall.

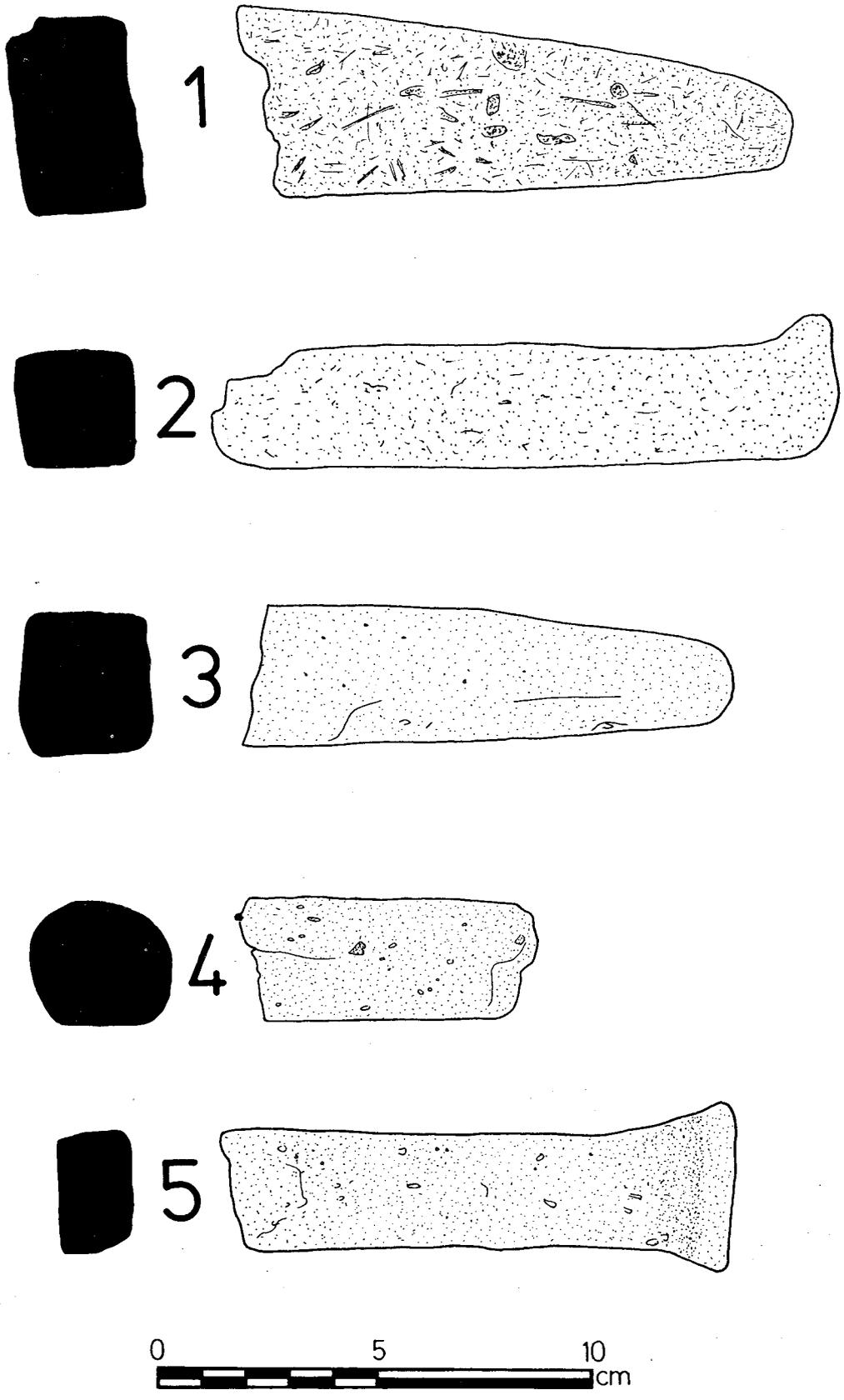


Fig. 2. Firebars. (1 Woodston, 2-5 Crowland).

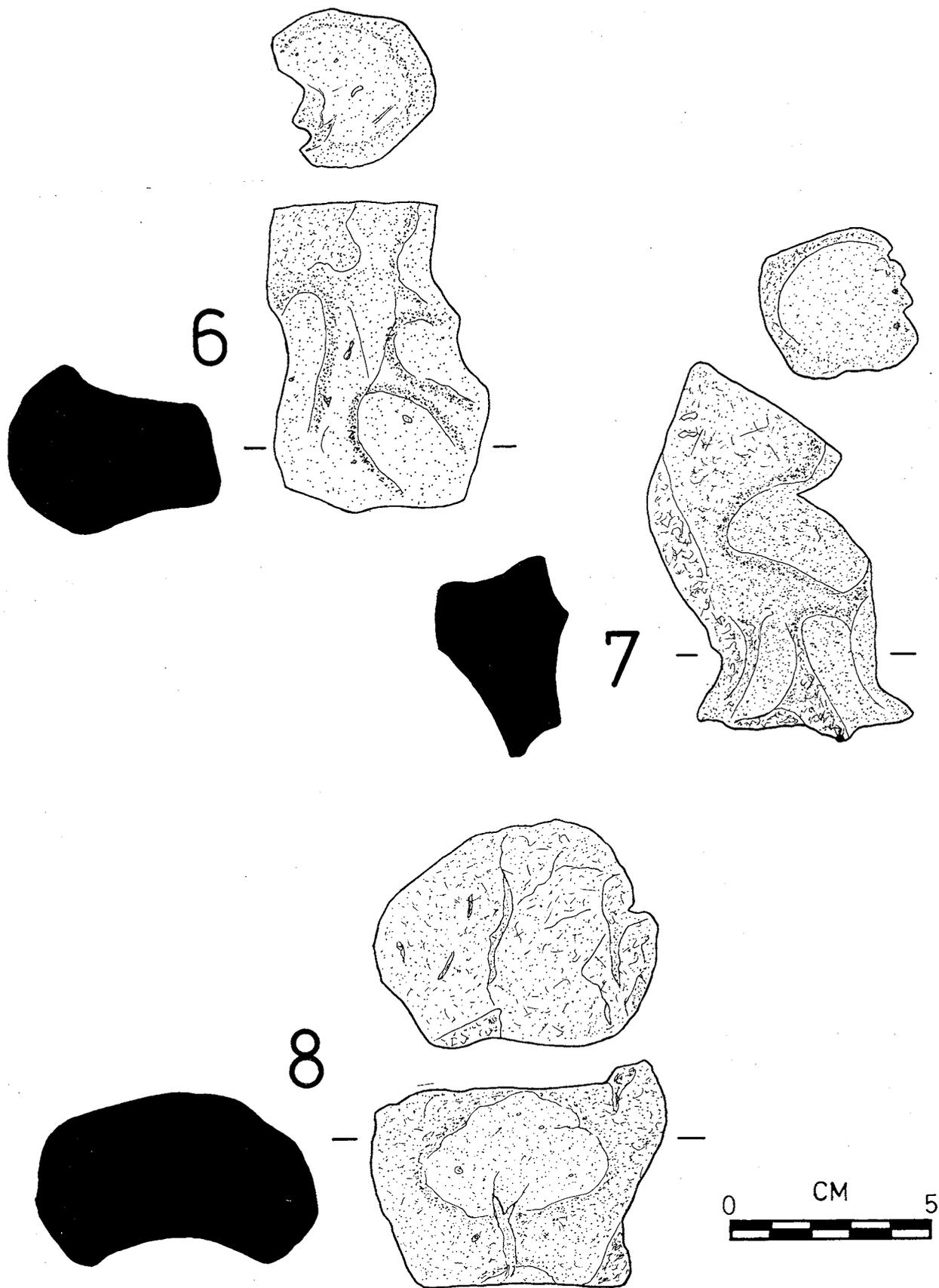


Fig. 3. "Handbricks" from The Reaches, Eye.

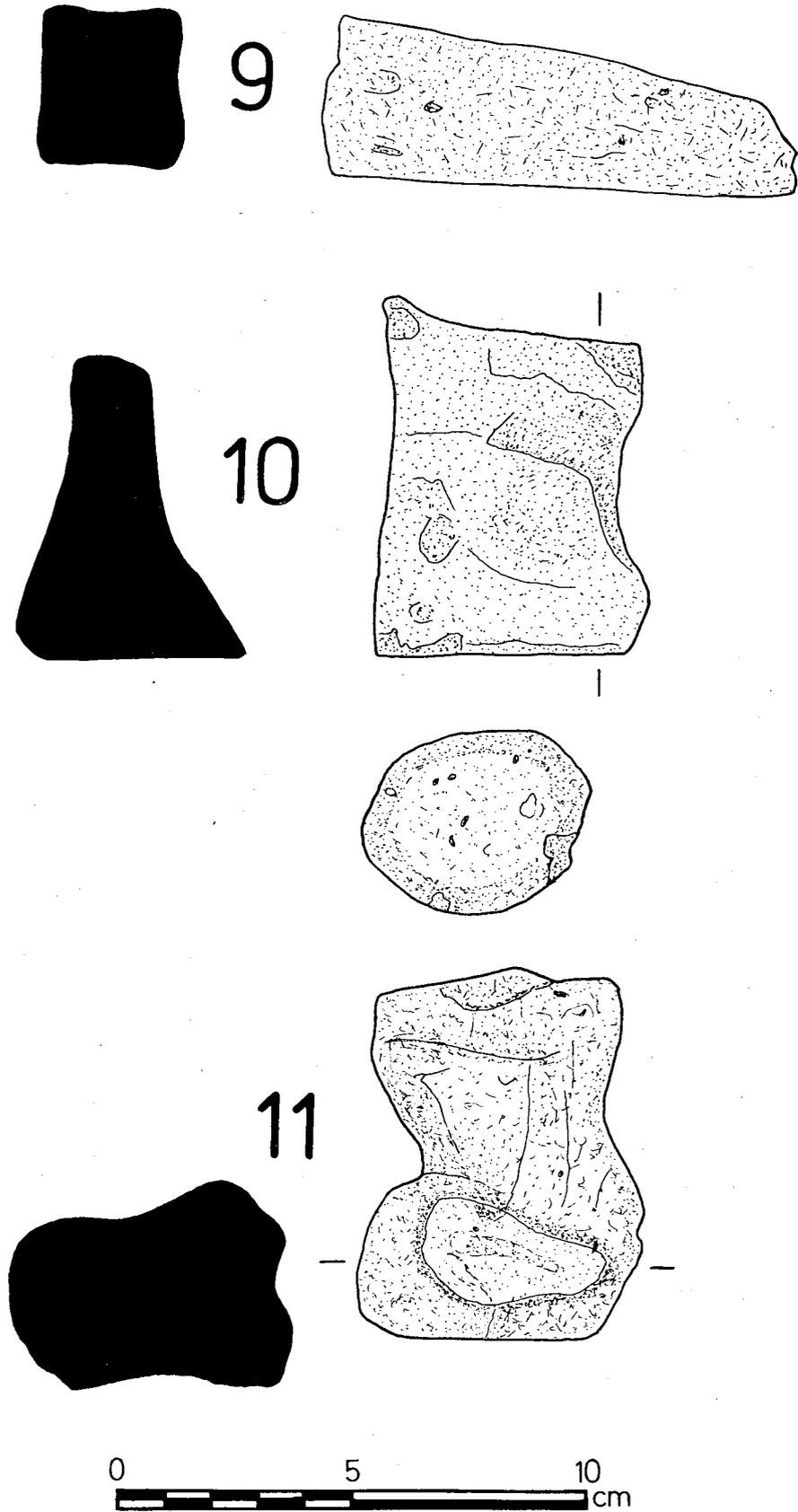


Fig. 4. Firebar (9 Peterborough Cathedral), Support (10 Eye) and "Handbrick" (11 Eye).

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