

Find no. 24/7810

Leather fragment found in 14-24/F431, a megalithic stone culvert within Structure 7, conserved as 5 separate fragments. Cattlehide.

1. Irregularly shaped item, now in at least two separate pieces, with two almost straight edges which meet almost, but not quite, in a right angle. The shorter edge is defined by a flattened line, parallel to outer edge and 4 mm from it. This makes it appear as if edge has been folded and hemmed, which is not the case.

Item has various irregularly spaced holes, but none of these seem to be traces of either stitching or slots for thongs.

Item is very fragile and is extremely delaminated, now consisting of separate grain and flesh layers.

Maximum dimensions 231 x 140 mm; thickness not measured because of delamination.

2. Irregularly shaped item with one curved edge, defined by a flattened line, as in item 1.

Item has various holes, but none of them appear to be either traces of stitching or slots for thongs.

Item is very fragmentary and delaminated.

Maximum dimensions 135 x 145 mm; thickness not measured because of delamination.

3. Irregularly shaped item, with 30 mm long edge, slightly folded as if for a hem, and with a suggestion of stitching, consisting of two grain-flesh holes, stitch length 5.5 mm. Item also has an irregularly cut, slightly curved edge, as well as torn edges.

Item also has various other holes but none of them appear to be either traces of stitching or slots for thongs.

Item is very fragmentary and delaminated.

Maximum dimensions 95 x 103 mm.

4. Irregularly shaped item with all edges torn, no cut edges survive.

Item is fragmentary and delaminated.

Maximum dimensions 80 x 125 mm.

5. Five small pieces, with no cut edges and no stitching.

All fragmentary and delaminated.

Maximum dimensions: 42 x 25 mm; 37 x 30 mm; 22 x 15 mm; 25 x 14 mm; 26 x 10 mm.

There are no obvious joins, yet the excavation photographs suggest that these fragments originally formed one object.

Discussion

Only one item has even a suggestion of stitching, and that consists only of two possible stitch holes. Three pieces, however, have cut edges, suggesting that they have been worked, and could be offcuts. However, the photographs from the excavation suggest that these fragments were originally one item.

The leather was found adjacent to a leather and vellum-working complex, which included appropriate tools. Thus, leather working waste would not be unusual. However, it is worth considering whether the fragments are part of some object, such as a shoe.

Shoes from the late 7th to early 9th centuries are most likely to be of one-piece construction, and are often referred to as 'hide shoes'. In this method, one piece of leather comprises both sole and upper, acting as a bag for the foot. The shoe is tightened by a thong threaded through slots at the top edge of the upper. Seams are usually short, and occur at the front of the shoe, up the middle of the vamp, and at the back of the shoe.

Small, incomplete fragments of such shoes often have few diagnostic features, apart from slots for thongs, as they have no obvious soles, and neither sole seams nor lasting margins. Furthermore, such a shoe is very likely to break up into unrecognisable 'scraps'.

An attempt has been made at reconstructing this item as a shoe, based on a tracing from an excavation photograph. The cut edges which appear to be visible in the photograph have been assumed to be the top edges of a vamp; two short, possibly stitched, edges have been interpreted as the opposing edges of a central vamp seam. The reconstruction suggests a low slip-on shoe. However, this reconstruction is very tentative, and is only based on the information in the photograph.

Examples of 'hide shoes' survive from Scotland, England, Ireland and the Continent. The Scottish examples include Loch Glashan, Buiston, Dowalton Loch and Dundurn.

(Thomas 2005, 74-75) However, the closest parallels come from York's Anglo-Scandinavian assemblage. Of particular interest is Style 1. Shoes 15354 and 15357 have a cutting pattern that might be similar to the Tarbat fragment. These shoes came from contexts dating to mid 10th C and late 10th to mid 11th C, respectively. (Mould, Carlisle & Cameron 2003, 3275-3279, figs. 1598 and 1599)

Accordingly, this piece of leather might be a remnant of such a shoe; on the other hand, it could just be waste from cutting out some other item.

References

- Crone, A 2005 **A Crannog of the 1st Millennium AD Excavations by Jack Scott at Loch Glashan, Argyll, 1960** Society of Antiquaries Scotland Monograph Series Edinburgh
- Mould, Q 2003 **Leather and Leatherworking in Anglo-Scandinavian and Medieval York** The Archaeology of York The Small Finds 17/16 Craft, Industry and Everyday Life York
- Carlisle, I
- Cameron, E
- Thomas, C 2005 The Leather Assemblage in Crone & Campbell