

7.1.9 MEDIEVAL LEATHER SHOES

Clare Thomas

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A pair of shoes was found during excavation of a skeleton interred within the nave of Tarbat Old Church (Burial 43/F83/C1228). The shoes were preserved beneath the wooden slats of the collapsed coffin lid, in a dry and oxygen-free environment. The skeleton was that of a mature male of at least 46 years. Textile hose were identified during conservation (see 7.1.10).

2.0 CONDITION OF SHOES

The shoes are in a fragmentary state and friable condition but with large areas of leather remaining intact. A copper-alloy buckle was found during excavation along with two linked straps. When found the right shoe was under the left. They were separated during conservation and are now sorted in custom-built protective packaging with supportive mesh allowing views from both above and below. Unfortunately, the mesh obscures details. They cannot be handled, and thus it is impossible to examine the interior. During burials, as the skeleton's feet rotted, the shoes were squashed flat, leaving mostly grain surfaces visible. The surviving flesh surfaces are degraded; only a few traces of stitching are visible.

3.0 DESCRIPTION

3.1 CONSTRUCTION

The shoes are of turnshoe construction, with an upper attached to a single sole with an edge-flesh seam. There is no evidence for rands, which would have strengthened the seam and made it more waterproof.

3.2 STYLE

Insufficient remains to indicate sole style. The uppers appear to be of one-piece design, with a butted edge-flesh seam linking quarters and vamp wing on the inside of the foot. These were high shoes or low boots, fastened by two straps and a buckle. The straps are no longer attached, but evidence from elsewhere suggests that they emerged from slits near the vamp throat.

3.3 LEFT SHOE

Substantial portions of the upper of this shoe survive and consist of vamp and quarters, as well as the two straps and a buckle. No sole fragments have been identified. The vamp is now folded asymmetrically. A short stretch of lasting margin with grain to flesh stitching channel, stitch length 5.5 - 6mm, is exposed on the inner vamp wing. This stitch length indicates that the shoe is of turnshoe construction. The front portion of the vamp is extremely degraded, with no further lasting margin visible. However, most of the vamp survives; it appears to have had an oval toe. There is a short tear running forwards from the vamp wing; this is not a seam. The quarters are folded and very fragmentary, and probably distorted. A small triangular portion at the front quarters is now folded backwards, exposing the flesh side. This tiny portion of flesh surface is delaminated and degraded but has very faint suggestion of hemstitch. The fold itself is accidental and of no significance. The top edge of the quarters has possibly been oversown. The back edge of the quarters is represented by a fold. The quarters end on the inside for a vamp/quarters seam on the outside of the foot, indicating that this upper is of one-piece design.

Two straps, linked by a copper alloy buckle, now lie on top of the quarters. One strap is approximately triangular. It has a grain to flesh stitching channel halfway along the strap, and secured by folding the strap through a slit in itself. The other half of this strap is folded underneath the wider portion. The second strap is a long tapering strip, and passes through the buckle. The buckle pin lies under the second strap. No pinholes are discernable.

The copper alloy buckle is round, with a diameter of 18mm, and a thickness of 2mm. The pin, which is partially hidden by the second strap is at least 13mm long and 2mm wide. No slits through which these straps might have been anchored on the flesh side or interior of the shoe have been identified. Parallels from elsewhere (see below) suggest that these would have been in the vamp throat/vamp wing area, which is now too degraded for any slit to be recognisable.

3.4 RIGHT SHOE

Parts of both sole and upper of this shoe survive.

3.5 SOLE

The grain side of seat, waist and rear of forepart of sole are visible from underneath. No stitching channels can be seen. There is no sign of a rand. There is a tear across the waist. The upper fragments comprise most of the quarters and part of a vamp wing. The lasting margin survives folded under vamp wing and quarters but only two unrelated stitch holes are visible. Quarters and vamp wing are joined by a butted edge-flesh seam, stitch length 3.5mm. There is also a short stretch of stitching channel, grain to flesh, but with the grain folded to form an edge, stitch length 3mm. This is on a fragment with grain surface, at present on the

quarters; it could imply an insert. It is also possible that the fragment, which is not clearly connected to anything else, is in the wrong place. The rest of the vamp does not survive.

4.0 DISCUSSION

The only published parallels for shoes with straps and buckles are from England. The best examples, and closest to the Tarbat shoes, are from London. These are low boots with one-piece wrap-around uppers with a straight opening down the centre of the vamp, and with two straps, one with a buckle. The straps emerge on either side of the foot from slits near the vamp throat. Some straps had been secured to the flesh side with stitching; other straps had spade-like terminals to prevent them being pulled through the slits. These boots are of early 15th-century date (Grew and de Neergaard 1988, 37, Fig. 59; 41, Figs 63-65, Fig. 105). Grew and de Neergaard also illustrate another type of boot with straps and buckles but this had a much higher leg than is possible with the Tarbat examples (Grew and de Neergaard 1988, 37, Fig. 59; 42, Figs 67-68). The other shoes with straps and buckles discussed by Grew and de Neergaard are not relevant to Tarbat. Similar boots were found in Coventry but unfortunately these are all from unstratified deposits (Thomas 1980, 12-13, Type 1a, fig. 4, 78/51/52 and 78/51/57; fig. 7, 58/158/7; fig. 18, 78/59/29). Other parallels are known from Reading (early 14th century - 1539) and Poole (early 15th century) (Mould 1997, 111, Fig. 63, no.17; Mould 1994, 71-73, fig. 53, no. 14, fig 54, no. 20a).

According to Grew and de Neergaard, most London shoe buckles of the early 15th century were made of lead alloy but with iron pins. Three of the lead/tin alloy buckles illustrated by Grew and de Neergaard resemble that from Tarbat in shape (Grew & de Neergaard 1988, 75-76, Fig. 110, 1, b, c, D). Mould also illustrates a circular metal buckle from Reading, but does not define the metal (Mould 1997a, Fig. 63, no.17 - early 14th century to 1539). Shoes from burials are rare. The best examples are from Sandwell Priory, where six pairs of shoes and a pair of leather legcoverings were found in graves that dated from the 13th to 16th centuries. The shoes were all turnshoes, and included four different sole and upper styles. The shoes were neither badly worn nor new. One pair had two straps but there was no indication of a buckle; also the design of the shoes was quite different to those from Tarbat. The leg coverings reached to about mid-thigh, and had laced slit above knee level. They were of 15th to early 16th-century date (Thomas 1991, 102-111). A pair of knee-high boots was found in a pilgrim's grave in Worcester Cathedral; these possibly date to the last quarter of the 15th century (Thomas 1991, 110-111; J. Spriggs pers.comm.). Similarly a pair of shoes or boots was excavated at Hulton Abbey (Thomas 1991, 111). A sole and upper, both of approximately 12th- to 14th-century date, along with other fragments of leather, were found in a grave at Jedburgh Abbey. However, these were not directly associated with any of the

skeleton parts recovered from this grave (Thomas 1995, 114; Grove 1995, 122, 125). This is probably the only surviving example of shoes and cloth hose. More common but still rare, are shoes with linings. An unstratified ankle-boot from the Perth High Street excavations, 1975-77, had a felt lining, while a calf-high boot from the same site, of 12th-century date, had stitching for a lining (Thomas forthcoming).

References

- Bogdan, N.Q. and Thomas, M.C. forthcoming *The Perth High Street Excavation, the Leather Fascicule VI*
- Grew, F. & de Neergaard, M. 1998. Shoes and pattens, *Medieval finds from London* (London)
- Grove, R. 1995. The Human Burials in Lewis and Ewart, 117-130
- Hawkes, J.W. and Fasham, P.J. 1997. Excavations on Reading Waterfront Sites 1979-1988 *Wessex Archaeological Reports 5, 108-141*
- Hodder, M.A. 1991. Excavations at Sandwell Priory and Hall 1982-88 *South Staffordshire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions 31*
- Lewis, J. and Ewart, G. 1995. Jedburgh Abbey: the archaeology and architecture of a border abbey, *Society of Scotland Monograph Series 10*
- Mould, Q. 1994. The Leather, in Watkins, 68-74
- Mould Q. 1997. Leather in Hawkes and Fasham
- Thomas, M.C. forthcoming, in Bogdan and Thomas
- Thomas, M.C. 1991. The Leather Shoes and Leggings in Hodder, 102-111
- Thomas, M.C. 1995. Leather in Lewis and Ewart, 114
- Thomas, S. 1980. Medieval Footwear from Coventry
- Watkins, D.R. 1994. The foundry excavation on Poole Waterfront 1986-7, *Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society Monograph Series 14*