

RUBICON'S BEST EVER FIND? DISCOVERING A UNIQUELY PRESERVED MEDIIEVAL OBJECT

June 29, 2012 Damian Shiels Commercial Archaeology, Conservation, Day of Archaeology 2012, Finds, Medieval ado, Britain, Caherduggan Castle, Caherduggan Castle Co.,Caherduggan Co., Chief Herald, Cork, Cork County Council, equally excited specialist, horse equipment, Horse Harness, illegal metal detectorists, Ireland, John Nicholl, leather specialist, Little Island, medieval castle site, Medieval Horse Equipment, Medieval Pendant, metal studs, National Museum of Ireland, Natural Disaster, Office of the Chief Herald, Office of the Chief Herald in Dublin, Rubicon Heritage, Susannah Kelly, the Chief Herald, United Kingdom, University College Dublin, www.rubiconblog.com

Today has been a typically varied day in the offices of [Rubicon Heritage](#); we have just this week relocated our main Irish office from an industrial estate in Little Island to a much more central premises in Midleton, where our new neighbours fix pianos! Amidst the chaos of the move and some of the less glamorous but vital aspects of running a commercial business (such as checking and authorising payments, reviewing accounts and writing tenders) there has been one real highlight that I want to share with you. As Cork experiences horrendous weather conditions and widespread flooding, the Irish Summer has been forgotten in the Rubicon offices. The reason for this is an email I received yesterday, which revealed that we had discovered what appears to be an internationally significant archaeological find.

What is particularly interesting about this find is that it is an advertisement for the wonders of archaeological conservation. During archaeological excavations for Cork County Council on a medieval castle site in Caherduggan, Co. Cork last year, we uncovered a well which contained a fantastic array of objects. Amongst the treasure trove of material that emerged from its muddy depths were a medieval leather shoe and an exquisite medieval bone die. But most interesting was

a long strip of leather, with what appeared to be metal studs along its length (to read a post about when we discovered it see [here](#)). We initially thought this might be a belt, and without further ado sent it off to the conservator, Susannah Kelly of University College Dublin, to see what remained.



The leather belt on its discovery at Caherduggan Castle, Co. Cork

After months of painstaking work, leather specialist John Nicholl took possession of the belt from Susannah this week, and yesterday sent me on some photographs of the now conserved object. When I opened the attachment to view the pictures I was greeted with a jaw-dropping sight- one of the most beautiful archaeological objects I have ever come across. The images revealed a phenomenally well preserved strip of leather with buckles at each end, and hinged heraldic shields mounted along its length. Excitement spread throughout the office like wildfire and I quickly got sidetracked, spending long minutes gazing at reference material. We put up a post [here](#) to share the information, and I arrived to work this morning to find some very interesting and helpful comment and responses. What we initially thought may be a scabbard belt is perhaps more likely a decorated medieval horse harness, undoubtedly the best preserved ever found in Ireland (and quite possibly Britain as well). All that normally survives of these decorated trappings are single harness pendants, but here we have a virtually complete example!



The well preserved buckle still attached to the leather, and partial pendants

I began this morning with a look through my trusty copy of *The Medieval Horse and It's Equipment* to learn more (meanwhile bombarding an equally excited specialist John with questions!), and it appears we really may have something special with this find. Indications are that in the 13th century the use of these pendants on horse equipment became more numerous, but were in decline by the end of the 14th century- this may suggest a potential 14th century date, which would tie in with our other objects from the well. Next I fired off an email to the [Office of the Chief Herald](#) in Dublin to see if they could tell me anything about the heraldic symbol on the pendants, which appears to be a lion. They informed me that a lion rampant is associated with the O'Keeffes, a Cork family, although there is no evidence as yet that the object belonged to them. They also pointed out that on the Caherduggan pendants the lion is facing the opposite way to what would normally be expected in heraldry (described as lion counter-rampant or lion rampant to the sinister), making it a rarity. Contact with the National Museum of Ireland revealed that they have a collection of individual pendants that have been retrieved from illegal metal detectorists, so we now have the always enjoyable prospect of a trip to the Museum to have a look for some parallels. I also took a few minutes to look through the Portable Antiquities Scheme database to discover if there were any parallels in the UK (to have a look at the results I got see [here](#)).



A detail of a portion of the belt with the mounts complete and intact, showing the lion motif



The other buckle with complete hinged pendants visible

We have barely scratched the surface of uncovering the story of this beautiful and potentially unique find, and there is undoubtedly much more to add before we are finished.

However, for today we are still trying to get to grips with the excitement of the discovery, and are busy getting experts together so we can explore all the possibilities- all in all a very good day to be in the Rubicon office! To follow updates on this object and other work we carry out you can check out our blog at www.rubiconblog.com!