

7.5 ASSESSMENT OF CERAMIC OBJECTS

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Summary

- 7.5.1 The two ceramic objects recovered consist of a fragment of a fired clay loomweight of bun-shaped form, characteristic of late Saxon textile working, and a sherd of Roman pottery that had been trimmed, probably in the early medieval period and probably to provide a counter for the game of *Tabula*.

Introduction

- 7.5.2 A fragment of a fired clay loomweight was recovered by manual excavation. It is relevant to the following Fieldwork Event Aims;

- Recovery of artefact assemblages (especially pottery) to elucidate the sequence of site development; to provide information on the status and economy of the site and data on trade and exchange;
- Recovery of environmental and other economic indicators if these are found to be present on site.

- 7.5.3 In addition, there was found a ceramic counter formed, probably in the early medieval period, from a basal sherd of a Roman fineware vessel. Though not directly relevant to the Fieldwork Event Aims described above, is an interesting social indicator (see below).

Methodology

- 7.5.4 The loom weight has been cleaned and assessed for its conservation needs by a conservation assistant. An examination of the remainder of the Ceramic Building Material and Fired Clay indicates that no other fragments of loomweights were recovered either by hand excavation or from the sampling programme.

- 7.5.5 The reused sherd has been cleaned by a finds assistant, separated from the bulk ceramics and treated as a small find.

- 7.5.6 Both objects have been examined with the aid of a hand lens. The original dimensions and fabric have been noted for the loomweight, as have the diameter and fabric of the potsherd.

Quantification

- 7.5.7 The loom weight fragment comes from an object of bun-shaped form (Dunning et al 1959, 23-5 and fig 6.3; Holden 1976, 310-1) with an original diameter of approximately 100mm. It was made in a clay, probably from a local source, with abundant white quartz (up to 1mm) and occasional red quartz (2mm or more) inclusions, either or both of which may be an added temper.

- 7.5.8 The counter was made from the base of a Roman vessel of central Gaulish Samian ware and had an original diameter of approximately 75mm. The body of the vessel has been pared away with a knife to leave a circular disc, ridged on one face.

Provenance

- 7.5.9 The loom weight was found in one of the larger pits within an area thought to have been used for domestic occupation (context 403, sub-group 129, Group 11, Phase 3). It is likely to have been made locally, at or near the site and would have formed part of a group of around 20 such items suspended from a warp-weighted loom (Walton Rogers 1997, 1753 and fig 812). Alongside several other objects (see Appendices 12 and 14), it provides evidence for textile manufacture at or near the site. The same context yielded seven sherds of late Anglo-Saxon pottery.
- 7.5.10 The counter was recovered from one of the smaller pits within the central area of the site (context 499, sub-group 179, Group 12, Phase 3). The sherd itself came from a vessel of Roman Central Gaulish Samian ware (CAT Fabric R43). Although it is the only datable object to have come from the pit, the feature has been attributed to a scatter of industrial waste pits (Group 12) assigned to Phase 3, dated *c.* 1050-1200, which would accord well with the likely date of this object in its re-used form.

Conservation

- 7.5.11 The loom weight is fragmentary and only about a quarter of it now survives. The original surface, present on one face, is slightly pitted and abraded, but otherwise survives in a good state. The proposed further analysis would be entirely descriptive and non-destructive, and would not conflict with any issues of long-term storage. It should be retained for future study and not discarded.
- 7.5.12 The same can be said for the counter, which survives in reasonable condition if a little worn. It can be stored for future analysis in the same way as a bulk find. The proposed future study would be non-destructive. The object is incomplete and could, in principle, be discarded after full recording.

Comparative material

- 7.5.13 Bun-shaped loom weights are thought to have come into use during the ninth century (Biddle 1990, 227-8; Walton Rogers 1997, 1753). Good assemblages of this type are known from Canterbury, *Sandtun* and Rochester (Harrison 1972, 155-6 and fig 20.12; Rady 1991, 17; Riddler, forthcoming) but few are well dated, as the following table demonstrates.

7.5.14 Table One

Bun-Shaped Loomweights from East Kent

<i>Location</i>	<i>Site</i>	<i>Quantity</i>	<i>Dating</i>
Canterbury	Church Lane	2	Ninth to Eleventh Century
Canterbury	Longmarket	12	Ninth Century ?
Canterbury	Castle Street	6	Eighth to Eleventh Century
Rochester	East Gate	40	<i>c.</i> 1050 - 1100
West Hythe	<i>Sandtun</i>	7	Ninth to Twelfth Century

- 7.5.15 This table should be used with caution. The dating of the Rochester examples is based on an assessment of ceramic dating undertaken in the early 1970s, and this may now need to be revised. Several loomweights, not included here, from the Marlowe Theatre excavation in Canterbury were described as 'bun-shaped' but are, in fact, of intermediate form. The Mersham example comes from a context with seven sherds of late Anglo-Saxon date, provisionally dated *c.* 875-1050.

7.5.16 The re-used potsherd can be identified as a counter, probably for the medieval game of *Tabula*. Simple discs of this type have been recovered from numerous sites of Roman and medieval date. Generally, they represent simple adaptations of sections of ceramic vessels or tiles and are cut to more or less regular circular or oval shapes. Their function has been discussed on a number of occasions and they have been regarded as pot lids or mats, household weights, reckoning counters and gaming pieces (Addyman and Priestly 1977, 139; MacGregor 1978, 33; Foreman 1991, 108; Nicholson in Hill 1997, 447-9). It is the latter suggestion that has prevailed in more detailed studies of groups of discs of this type (Mann 1982, 14; Crummy 1983, 94-5). It is noticeable, in particular, that these discs occur in Roman and early medieval contexts and that they are rarely seen during the Anglo-Saxon period although a series of ceramic examples came from late ninth century contexts at Lincoln (Mann 1982, 14 and fig 15). This dating scheme corresponds reasonably well with that known for the game of *Tabula* as it was played in England (Riddler 1994). Moreover, the size of these discs is commensurate with that of the contemporary and more ornate examples of bone, antler, whalebone and ivory. Ceramic discs could be stacked easily, which is one of the requirements of *Tabula*. Counters of this size would have enabled the game to have been played both indoors and outdoors, and there is good evidence from the Roman period onwards, to indicate that the game was played in both locations.

Potential for further work

7.5.17 The loom weight should be considered alongside the other objects from this site that relate to textile manufacture. As noted above, our understanding of textile production in East Kent in the late Anglo-Saxon and early medieval periods is fairly limited and the Mersham evidence is particularly welcome in this respect.

7.5.18 The ceramic disc comes from a context assigned (albeit tentatively) to Phase 3, which would accord with its use at or around the Norman conquest. Similar examples are known from Townwall Street (Dover), but are otherwise little published from East Kent (Walton Rogers and Riddler, forthcoming). This example is a useful addition to this small corpus and it widens the range of household activities attestable on the site, to include recreational pursuits. It cannot be closely dated but it has been placed within the early medieval phase of activity, which accords well with the period of greatest popularity of this object type. No further work is likely to be required for this object.

7.5.19 Bibliography

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