

APPENDIX 7: ASSESSMENT OF BONE AND SHELL

Lyn Blackmore

Conservation by Liz Barham

1. Introduction

Three items from ARC CXT 98 are of bone with iron, while one is either of bone or amber with iron. One bead is made from a cowrie shell. The artefacts were recovered by hand excavation and sieving.

The study of the material should assist the following fieldwork aims:

- *To establish a chronology for the cemetery and a sequence of development within it.*
- *To help determine burial practices.*

Methodology

All the finds were examined for the assessment, and each item was given an individual accession number. The data was recorded on accession cards and entered onto the Oracle database and subsequently converted to RLE Datasets.

Quantification

Three artefacts are made of bone and iron. One is a comb while the others are pendants. In addition there is a small and badly preserved pendant fragment which could be of bone or amber.

Provenance

The comb, two pendants (probably identical) and the cowrie bead were found in the same rich female grave ([214]). One of the two pendants was found by the left hip, together with two amethyst beads, and another pendant of copper alloy and glass. The comb was placed lower down, on top of the left leg, possibly in a case of some kind, although this has not survived.

The third pendant was found in grave [305]. This may contain amber or bone, but if it is of the same type as those from [214] it would suggest a connection between these two burials, which contained the richest groups of female grave goods. Cowrie beads usually occur in necklaces, although they can occur elsewhere in the grave.

Given the poor condition of the bone it is possible that other bone objects buried on the site have not survived, but the apparent cluster in two graves may be significant.

The two antler pendants may be of local origin but the cowrie shell is an import, possibly from the Red Sea. If the third pendant proves to contain amber this may also be an import, although it could have come from elsewhere in England.

Conservation

This assessment considers requirements for finds analysis, illustration and investigative conservation of the bone and shell finds from ARC CXT 98. It also includes work necessary to produce a stable archive in accordance with MAP2 (English Heritage 1992), and to the standard required by the Museum of London's standards for archive preparation. (Museum of London 1999).

Treatments are carried out under the guiding principles of minimum intervention and reversibility. Whenever possible preventative rather than interventive conservation strategies are implemented. Procedures aim to obtain and retain the maximum archaeological potential of each object.

All conserved objects are packed in archive quality materials and stored in suitable environmental conditions. Records of all conservation work are prepared on paper and on the Museum of London collections management system (Multi MIMSY) and are temporarily stored at the Museum of London.

The accessioned finds of bone and shell were assessed by visual examination of the objects using a binocular microscope where necessary, and by examining their related X-radiographs.

Analysis.

One item, [305] <93>, was identified for further investigation and analysis: scanning electron microscope (SEM) examination is recommended in order to identify the material in the iron mount; this is thought to be bone, but could be amber.

Illustration.

One item was identified for cleaning, ([214.11]<44>) prior to illustration/photography.

Preparation for archive deposition or storage prior to display.

The bone comb [214.6] <42> is in a particularly poor condition, but some of the larger fragments have matching break edges and can be re-adhered to clarify its shape.

All five of the bone and shell finds should be repacked: The comb and pendants should have plastazote mounts within boxes to protect them from over-handling, because of their extreme fragility. [214] <44> and [305] <93> should ideally be packed, enclosed with silica gel, as in these cases the iron is all that is keeping the object together.

Comparative material

From what remains of the comb it would appear that it is standard for the period; it is less ornate than the single-sided comb from Polhill (Hawkes 1973, 198; Philp 1973, Fig.53, No.487). No parallels have yet been found for the pendants, but they are clearly related to the decorated bone disc with an iron mount found at Burwell (Lethbridge 1931, 62-3; Fig.32, no.6).

Cowrie beads are known from several burials of the period, including Finglesham and Buckland, Dover (Meaney 1981, 123-28; Geake 1997, 62).

Potential for further work

The study of the material should assist the following Fieldwork Event Aims:

- *To establish a chronology for the cemetery, to establish a sequence of development within the cemetery.*
- 1.1 The date of the antler pendants is uncertain, but the cowrie bead and other finds in grave [214], indicate that this is a 7th century burial. Further research into these items may allow this date to be refined.
- *To help determine burial practices.*
- 1.2 The two antler pendants may also have had some amuletic purpose. Cowrie shells are popular amulets even today; in the 7th century they may have signified the female gender/fertility, although other interpretations have been suggested (Meaney 1981, 128; Geake 1997, 62). It is likely, but by no means certain, that cowrie beads had the same symbolic meaning and were used by those who were unable to obtain a complete shell. Cowrie shells and beads were almost always buried with younger women and children. The fact that only one bead occurs on this site and that it is together with the antler pendants in one of the richest female graves may help to interpret the age and status of the deceased.

The following Landscape Zone aims (towns and their rural landscapes 100 BC-AD 1700) may be addressed when the finds are considered together with the other accessions:

- *The ways in which human populations moved through the landscape, including the organisation of communication networks.*
- 1.3 The antler pendants and comb indicate specialised bone-working; the rarity of the former may indicate that they were imports to the site, or made by itinerant craftsmen.

- *The economy of human populations using the landscape, including trade and contact with other populations.*

1.4 Cowrie shells and beads indicate contact with populations who either lived in or were in contact with the Middle East or Mediterranean. The means by which cowries reached England and were redistributed across the country is unknown; their distribution is mainly confined to coastal Kent, and the southern Midlands (Geake 1997, Map 27). The antler pendants are so unusual that, if a parallel can be found, they will indicate contact, direct or indirect, with that site.

New research aim.

Study of the finds *per se* will be of importance to typological and technological studies of Early to Middle Saxon material culture. If possible the dimensions of the bone comb should be established. All finds should be illustrated and/or photographed.

Further Work

Further work should include:

- Further analysis, including identification of bone/antler/amber and cowrie
- Integration of the finds with the stratigraphic information
- Comparison with material from other sites:
- Compilation of finds catalogue for inclusion in publication
- Writing of finds report
- Preparation of finds for illustration/photography
- Conservation

Bibliography

Geake, H, 1997, 'The Use of Grave Goods in Conversion Period England' *BAR Brit Ser* 261.

Hawkes, S C, 1958, 'The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Finglesham, Kent: a reconsideration' *Medieval Archaeol* 2, 1-71.

Lethbridge, T C, 1931, 'The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Burwell Cambridgeshire' *Cambridge Antiq Soc New Series*, 3.

Meaney, A L, 1981, 'Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones' *BAR Brit Ser* 96.

Table 1: Assessment of composite bone finds and worked shell

Context	Special Number	Material	Count	Period	Date	Comments (Description)
214.6	42	Bone/iron	1	EM	Late 7 th century	Double-sided comb; antler with iron rivets; very fragmented
214.7	40	Bone/iron	1	EM	Late 7 th century	Pendant made of antler pedicle with part of iron mount; decorated with a circle of punched dots; very fragile
214	44	Bone/iron	1	EM	Late 7 th century	Pendant fragment, as above with iron mount for suspension; very fragile

305	93	Bone?/ iron	1	EM	Late 7 th century	Pendant fragment, as above with iron mount for suspension (possibly amber not bone)
214	142	Shell	1	EM	7 th cent	Small cowrie bead

