

7.1 Assessment of Anglo-Saxon Gaming Pieces

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Introduction

- 7.1.1 A small number of antler gaming pieces were recovered during the removal of the Byzantine bowl from central cemetery grave C5. Others were noted within the bowl, which was on its side, and several more observed in an area beneath the bowl, apparently associated with mineralised leather and wood. This area of the grave was block-lifted and excavated under laboratory conditions.

Methodology

- 7.1.2 The soil block was radiographed (plates 24-31) prior to laboratory excavation, in part to facilitate recovery of the *in situ* counters. Plans were produced of the counters in the soil block and in two separate layers within the bowl.
- 7.1.3 The counters have been assessed, cleaned, stabilised and packaged by a conservator. Each counter and fragment has been viewed under low magnification.

Quantification

- 7.1.4 A total of 45 counters was recovered, their quantification and provenance is tabulated below (**Table 38**).

Table 38: Quantification and Provenance of Counters

Find no.	Count	Location
C803	2	Beneath the bowl
C823	2	Near the bowl
C804 (Layer 1)	20	Within the bowl
C804 (Layer 2)	5	Within the bowl
C804	3	Within the bowl
C866	13	Beneath the bowl
Total	45	

- 7.1.5 Although it is impossible to determine the precise number originally placed in the grave, comparisons with other assemblages would suggest that few have been lost. There are two distinct sizes present, as well as decorative elements on the plano-convex surfaces, and no base marks. No traces of a board were seen, although traces of organic remains also noted in the vicinity may indicate that a board was originally present.

Provenance

- 7.1.6 The counters were originally within a leather container (fragments of which also survived) placed within the Byzantine bowl. Their survival is due to proximity to the Byzantine bowl, which neutralised the acidity of the surrounding soil.
- 7.1.7 It is not known where the gaming pieces were originally produced, although it is likely that it was in the local area.

Conservation

- 7.1.8 The counters remain extremely fragile. They are currently stored in appropriate packaging and environmental conditions for organic remains. Future research will

not affect their long-term storage, and will merely involve the study of their dimensions and non-destructive confirmation of their material.

- 7.1.9 They should be retained for future study and potential display.

Comparative material

- 7.1.10 The Saltwood counters can be broadly compared with similar sized assemblages from later 6th and early 7th century inhumations at a range of sites across south-east England, including burials from Faversham, Keythorpe Hall, Shudy Camps, Taplow, Sutton Hoo and Carisbrooke, as well as from contemporaneous continental burials. In those cases where sufficient data was retrieved they are generally associated with wealthy male burials. It is perhaps noteworthy that saga references indicate that accomplishment at board games was one of the skills to be learnt by nobility (Gabriel 1988, 233-6).

- 7.1.11 Specifically relevant to Kent, similar gaming pieces have come from Sarre graves 6 and 198, Kingston grave 299, Northfleet, Bishopsbourne grave 3 and Dover Buckland grave 14. With the exception of the Sarre graves, which produced similar quantities to Saltwood, only one or two counters were recovered from the other sites listed (Brent 1866, 157; Youngs 1983, 874 and pl 15e; Perkins 1992, 108 and 116).

- 7.1.12 The presence of patterning on the upper surfaces and the absence of base marks suggests that the Saltwood set is more likely to belong to the first half of the 7th century.

Potential for further work

- 7.1.13 As is demonstrated, sets of this type are rare in Anglo-Saxon England with only a handful from inhumation graves. This set appears to follow the general pattern of distribution, i.e. within male graves of conspicuous wealth. The set is broadly similar in size to the largest sets recovered elsewhere, suggesting few, if any, counters are missing.

- 7.1.14 As such, the Saltwood set is an important collection for the study of early medieval board games, and detailed analysis may, for instance, determine if the Saltwood set represents gaming pieces for one or perhaps more players. Without an associated board it will not be possible to determine the nature of the game for which these were intended, although comparisons with other sets recovered elsewhere may provide some possible suggestions.

- 7.1.15 In terms of the Fieldwork Event Aims, this assemblage is relevant to the dating of grave C5 and the chronology of the central cemetery. It also provides indications both of status and social behaviour.

Bibliography

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