

Fig. 1: site locations (base map courtesy of MoLAS)

# Knowing people through their feet: the shoes of *Lundenburg*

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IN RECENT YEARS, and especially with the excavation of the Royal Opera House site, much has been learned about the location, development and character of the mid-Saxon emporium of *Lundenwic*. The process of reoccupation of the nearby ruined Roman city is still, however, as imperfectly understood as when Vince discussed the 'long' and 'short' datings ten years ago<sup>2</sup>. Although it is generally accepted, on the basis of

dendrochronological dates and documents, that Queenhithe saw the first restoration of wharves in the late 9th century, the early development of inner areas remains subject to controversy, even in the face of many mid-medieval (9th-12th century) sites excavated in recent years in the Cheapside and Guildhall areas<sup>3</sup>. Although documentary evidence suggests a rapid growth in *Lundenburg* as a centre of commerce in the 10th century, the process of

1. D. Bowsher & G. Malcolm 'Excavations at the Royal Opera House: Middle Saxon London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 50 (1999) 4-11.

2. A. Vince *Saxon London: an Archaeological Investigation* (1990) 26-8.

3. R. Wroe-Brown 'The Saxon origins of Queenhithe' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 50 (1999) 12-16.

reclamation remains archaeologically uncertain. The degree and nature of Scandinavian cultural influence is another controversial area, with suggestions of Saxo-Danish structures<sup>4</sup>. Even the mid-11th and early 12th centuries, during which the most 'significant' event in English history took place, are enigmatic in many ways as far as the lives of ordinary Londoners are concerned. The splendid medieval city described by Fitzstephen in c AD 1174<sup>5</sup> is well known from both historical and archaeological sources but the lifestyles of Londoners during the evasively-named Saxo-Norman period preceding this are much more elusive.

A major practical difficulty, according to Vince<sup>6</sup>, confirmed by present renewed discussion, arises from the archaeologically unhelpful nature of pottery from the 10th and early 11th centuries in London. Over the last three decades, however, large quantities of mid-medieval leather have been produced from excavations in the City of London, and other North European urban sites<sup>7</sup>. Modern conservation methods (freeze drying) have enabled speedy and efficient conservation of even the smallest fragments of leather. Two Museum of London publications in the late 1980s on footwear<sup>8</sup> are extremely useful but do not, of course, take into account the rich assemblages of footwear coming from 1990s excavations such as Upper Thames Street (10th-early 12th century), Number 1 Poultry (especially rich for the 10th century) and Guildhall Yard (11th-12th century).

Footwear is a curiously neglected artefactual category, compared with, say, spearheads or brooches yet it has considerable potential for archaeologists. Variations over time can be used as chronological indicators in the same way as more traditionally used artefacts<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, unlike spears or brooches, footwear is sized and shaped to the body of the wearer and from large assemblages, limited but significant demographic information can be obtained<sup>10</sup>. Potential also lies in the investigation of the relationship between stylistic vari-

ability and variation in physical maturity and sex in a living population. Finally, footwear in northern Europe carries a heavy symbolic load. This is not simply a matter of display of wealth and social mobility, or the public statement of social identities based on ethnicity or other affiliation. Feet, bare or shod, play an important part in the iconography of the human body in Christian representations and further complexities arise from so-called pagan iconographies in which footwear can symbolise travelling (as with the *todenschuh* or *helsko*, indispensable to the dead in their passage along the stony path to Hel<sup>11</sup>) and/or female fertility and domestic prosperity (as possibly with the worn shoes concealed in the chimney breasts of medieval households across northern Europe)<sup>12</sup>.

This article will concentrate on the first two areas and contribute towards understanding of the construction of social identities in mid-medieval London. The implications of the wider role in the symbolic constructions of the period will be addressed elsewhere.

### The London sample

This article is based on first-hand recording of a sample representing 696 items of footwear dated to the 10th-12th centuries, drawn from 14 sites in the City of London (Fig. 1). Only 47 items are complete shoes, dating mainly from the 10th/early 11th centuries when the use of leather thong rather than thread to attach sole to upper gave a taphonomic advantage to whole shoe survival. Number 1 Poultry (251 items) and Guildhall Yard (234 items) dominate, and for the purposes of analysis the sites have been grouped into Thameside, Cheapside and Guildhall. Secondary dumping contexts such as rubbish pits and occupational dumps account for around 40% of the finds with tertiary contexts such as road surfaces<sup>13</sup> and riverside wharf revetment infill<sup>14</sup> accounting for another 40% and the remainder mostly from cesspits. From the mid-11th century onwards, wharf infill can be associated stratigraphically with preserved timber revetments, giving the

4. N. Bateman & G. Porter *Guildhall Yard East: an Archaeological Assessment of Excavations over the Roman Amphitheatre 1985-97* MoLAS (1997) 77.  
5. W. Fitzstephen 'Description of London' in J. Stow *Survey of London* (1956) 501-550.  
6. A. Vince *op cit* fn 2, 5.  
7. For example in E. Schia *De Arkeologiske utgravninger I Gamlebyen* Oslo: Mindets Tomt (1977).  
8. F. Grew & M. De Neergaard *Shoes and Pattens: Medieval Finds from Excavations in London* (1988); F. Pritchard 'Footwear' in A. Vince (ed) *Aspects of Saxo Norman London: II Finds* (1988) 213-240.

9. E. Schia *op cit* fn 7, 196-201.  
10. W. Groenman-van Waateringe 'Shoe Sizes and Demography' *Helenium* 18 (1978) 184-9; W. Groenman-van Waateringe *Leather from Medieval Svendborg* (1988).  
11. J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant (eds) *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (1994).  
12. G. Jobes *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols Part 2* (1962) 1440.  
13. P. Rowsome *Heart of the City: Roman, Medieval and Modern London revealed by Archaeology at Number 1 Poultry* (2000) 49.  
14. E.g. in G. Milne & C. Milne *Medieval Waterfront at Trig Lane* (1982).

opportunity for dendrochronology to give at least a TAQ for the footwear<sup>15</sup>.

### Making the most of fragments

Perhaps a reason for the neglect of footwear as an artefactual category has been the assumption that only the rare near-complete shoes are worth studying. Further difficulties arise from the complexity of footwear: many choices are involved, and footwear typologies are notoriously unhelpful<sup>16</sup>. The approach used here attempts to emulate the makers' decision patterns through deconstructing individual shoes into a repertoire of independent choices. Even a small, tatty, seemingly uninformative fragment of shoe can reveal much about these. For the sample, any fragment giving information on at least two independent variables was used to build up a database.

Some important choices made by the makers and users of these shoes, notably colour of leather, are unfortunately not accessible. Variation in the types of leather chosen, whilst interesting and useful, will not be covered in this article due to lack of access to resources for reliable testing: where information has been available, the use of calf and/or cowhide seems standard.

### The historico-social context

There is no specific representational or documentary evidence as to the making and wearing of footwear by Londoners over the mid-medieval period. More generally, there are abundant mid-medieval representations of human images in manuscript illuminations, statuary, ivories, embroidery and tapestries. These should not, of course, be seen as realistic portrayals of what people wore at the time. Where 'real' contexts are, however, being portrayed such as the presentation of gifts to Winchester by King Edgar<sup>17</sup> it is reasonable to

suppose that the clothing of individuals is more 'realistic' than in the portrayal of saints or personages from antiquity. Owen-Crocker's volume on Anglo Saxon dress<sup>18</sup> is particularly useful here, but much work remains to be done on the iconographic vocabularies used to depict the human body in Christian representations.

Elsewhere, footwear is not mentioned as a trade item, and as Aelfric, in his colloquy of *c.* AD 1000, included shoemakers in his list of crafts indispensable to the lives of the common people<sup>19</sup> my assumption is that Londoners' footwear was locally made. The presence of abundant offcuts and discarded hide fragments in many contexts supports this, although no lasts have yet been identified as coming from London, and a shoe-making workshop has yet to be identified with confidence. Hides, judging by the evidence for butchery on many sites, must have been easily available and presumably there were tanneries.

### The footwear of *Lundenberg* 'Default' characteristics

From the practical point of view some features are not in themselves useful chronological indicators. They can be found at any time or place throughout the period, although not necessarily together in the same shoe. It is hard to resist the idea that these particular variants are a default form, unquestioned and unconscious fallbacks where no more proactive choice is appropriate.

Throughout the 300-year period covered by this study, the only absolute is the use of leather for the body of the shoe. Footwear can be made from wood (clogs), coiled rope (espadrilles) and textiles (canvas shoes) so the 'choice' of leather should be seen as positive, if utterly taken for granted. Certain other ways of making also remain ever present, although their frequency varies in terms of time and place. Separate sole turnshoe construction is the most durable characteristic. Almost (but not all) London medieval shoes are of this basic type, as indeed are those of Winchester, York, Oxford, and Dublin though not necessarily those of Haithabu. The earlier turnshoes from London are seamed together using leather thongs, which necessarily give a thick seam, but later ones (*c.* AD 1040 onwards) were seamed with thread and trimmed so finely that the seams seem impossibly fragile.



Fig. 2: early-12th-century ankle shoes (from Grew & De Neergaard 1988, 9)

15. Milne & Milne *op cit* fn 14.

16. See for example the typology offered in Groenman-van Waateringe *Die Lederfunde von Haithabu* (1984) 1-3.

17. MS Cotton Vespasian A viii.

18. G. Owen-Crocker *Dress in Anglo Saxon England* (1986).

19. In M. Swanton (ed and trans) *Anglo Saxon Prose* (1993) 173.

Other durable items in the repertoire of shoemakers throughout the period are parallel-sided soles with symmetrical rounded toes and round backed heels; simple fastenings involving a pair of slots in the ankle area to take a single drawstring; foot-enclosing shoes of neither particularly high or low cut; simple embroidered stripes running from the toe to the throat of the shoe, i.e. bisecting the vamp. There is no obvious correlation, however, between these features, any one of which can be found combined with more specifically located variants and found in any size of shoe.

#### *The varying features*

Other footwear variables show more focussed variation. Although the blunt rounded toe never disappears, there is a clear progression in frequency from blunt toes in the early 10th century to narrower pointed toes by the end of the 11th century. Around this time, excessively long, broad-based, asymmetric toes make an abrupt appearance. These are at first associated with the symmetrical tapered soles which are so characteristic of the 10th and 11th centuries, i.e. soles with only the subtlest acknowledgement of the asymmetry of the natural foot. From the late 11th century onwards, however, the familiar instep-waisted, asymmetric sole makes an appearance and elongated toes quickly

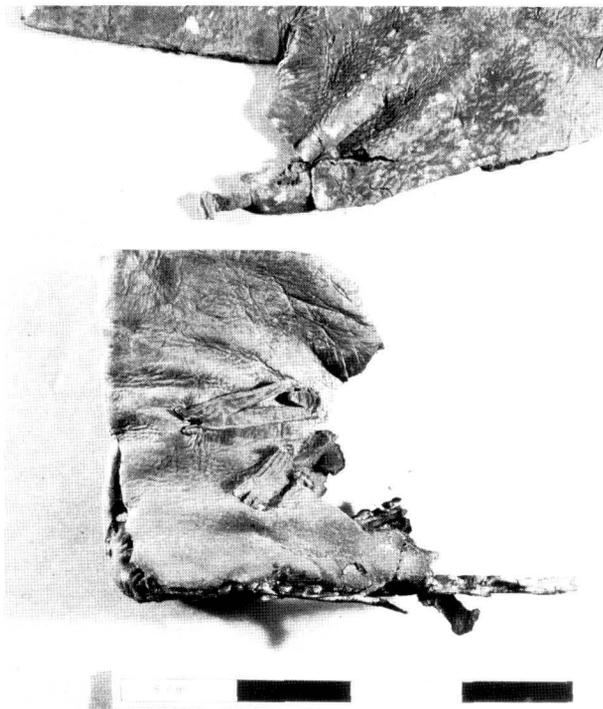


Fig. 3: tags and toggle fastenings on late-10th-century ankle boots (VRY89 & UPT90)

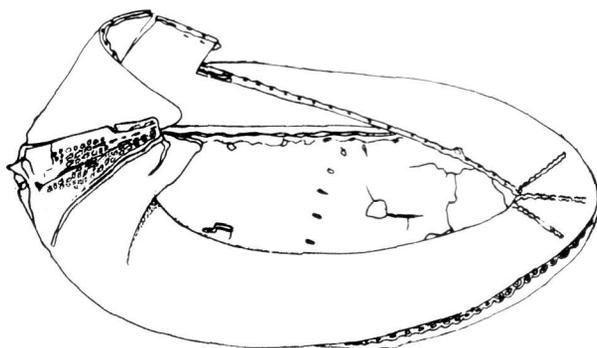


Fig. 4: decorative pattering on the heel of an (?) early-10th-century slipper (ONB94)

become associated with this. Fig. 2 illustrates a fine example: in technical ways these contemporary shoes are identical but one is a finely made survivor of the 'old shape' and the other is a statement of a new concept of the shape of the foot. It is interesting that the known examples of these floppy toed shoes (which are *not* the much later poulains of the 14th century<sup>20</sup>) are large adult sizes, almost certainly male, and are crudely made in terms of finishing detail and fineness of cutting and stitching.

Along with the trend towards more pointed toes goes a gradual trend towards higher cut footwear. The low cut 'slipper type', seamed at the side or the back, is very popular in the 10th century but has disappeared by the mid 11th. The majority of shoes from the Guildhall Yard (post-1040) cover at least the foot, and many cling to the ankle, closely bound in by drawstrings threaded through a multiplicity of small slits. These drawstrings are often plaited and the slits arranged in decorative ways. Again, the late 11th century sees a return to low cut shoes, but they are associated with entirely novel features such as waisted soles, open-work decoration, straps and elongated toes and are quite unlike the earlier 'slippers'.

Fastening methods involve a very definite conscious decision by the shoemaker, at an early stage. A method with particular significance for London involves wrap around flaps or latches which are cut as part of the original upper and, on the foot, brought around the throat of the foot to link up with tags which have been attached to the upper by knotting on the inside (Fig. 3). Toggles made of rolled leather secure the latchet to the tag. Latchet shoes become very popular in London towards the end of the 10th century, but have almost disappeared by the mid 11th. Although

20. Grew & De Neergaard *op cit* fn 8, 28-36.

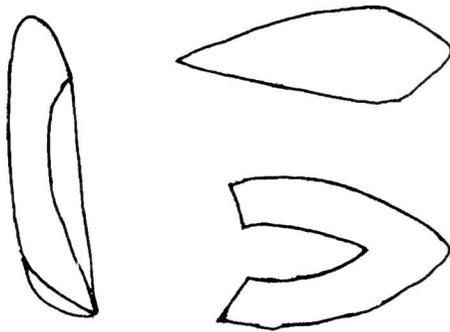


Fig. 5: the distinctively mid-medieval Back Point

known elsewhere, e.g. York<sup>21</sup> and Haithabu<sup>22</sup>, they are nowhere near as common as they are in London between AD 970-1030. Also from this period come a small number of ingenious original fastening methods.

Besides the ubiquitous embroidered vamp stripe, there are focussed variants in decoration. In the earlier period, the stripe is often impressed and at least one shoe has a triple-fanned set of stripes on the vamp. Earlier shoes occasionally have an elaborate pattern of impressed lines and circles on the heel (Fig. 4). Later 'traditional' shoes sometimes have a raised vamp stripe, created by splitting, everting the edges and over-sewing the seam, and are more likely to have double or triple stripes. Although shoes with cut edges bound with thread can be found at any time, unbound edges are commoner with earlier shoes and the stitching becomes finer and closer over time so that some of the beautifully made early-12th-century 'traditional' shoes look as if they are machine finished. Some of these later shoes show clear signs of having been edged with a top band.

Finally, one of the most primary decisions a shoemaker must have made concerns the shape of the sole. Many shoes of this period have a highly distinctive arrangement whereby the back of the sole is extended into a point, which is then curved upwards and incorporated in the upper (Fig. 5). Sometimes in the earlier (up to the late 10th century) shoes the one-piece upper is seamed around

the Back Point. In later shoes, the Back Point is inset into the upper. The Back Point is most popular in the late 10th century, remains in use throughout the 11th century but has completely disappeared by the early 12th century. There is a clear correlation between the Back Point and small-medium (female?) adult sizes (see below).

#### *Similarity through difference: the misfits*

It may seem that the footwear described so far is highly variable. I would argue that although no two shoes are the same, there is a limited repertoire of acceptable variants in use with an infrastructure of default design decisions. This claim is reinforced by the presence of a small group of shoes (14 items, three near complete), which are radically different. These shoes all come from Number 1 Poultry, ten from a context which represents the lowest surface of the driveway leading to the market place south of present Cheapside<sup>23</sup>. Although of the same symmetrical tapered shape as the other shoes, structurally these shoes are completely different. They are extremely elaborate one-piece cuts, which are then folded like origami to produced a three-dimensional shoe with a wrap around extension at front and back. Most bizarre of all is the lop-sided panel and strap which constitute the vamp (Fig. 6). Not only are these unlike London shoes, they do not resemble stylistically any other known shoes of northern Europe although the structure is like that of some pre-Scandinavian Irish shoes (8th-9th century) of uncertain provenance<sup>24</sup>.

These Asymmetric One Pieces (AOPs) are discussed more fully in the forthcoming report on Number 1 Poultry<sup>25</sup>. For now, the most important point is their pointing-up of the stylistic conformity of the rest of the mid-medieval London footwear.

#### *Tentative chronological sequence*

Much of the sequencing incorporated above is based on reasoning from securely dated contexts, e.g. from Billingsgate or Upper Thames Street, to more broadly dated contexts such as the rubbish pits below St Benet Sherehog on Cheapside (dated AD 900-1050). The proposal that certain characteristics are early 10th century, or even late 9th, is more arguable as no other footwear-producing contexts in London have been confidently dated to this (Alfredian?) period: indeed, the reasoning is based partly on the absence of these characteristics from

21. A. Macgregor 'Anglo-Scandinavian Finds from Lloyds Bank, Pavement and other sites' *The Archaeology of York* 17: The small finds (1982) 138-42.

22. Groenman-van Waateringe (1984) *op cit* fn 3.

23. P. Treveil & P. Rowsome 'Number 1 Poultry -- the main

excavation: the late Saxon and Medieval sequence' *London Archaeol* 8 no. 11 (1998) 283-91.

24. A. T. Lucas 'Footwear in Ireland' *County Louth Archaeol* J 13 no 4 (1956) 366-387.

25. P. Rowsome *et al* forthcoming.

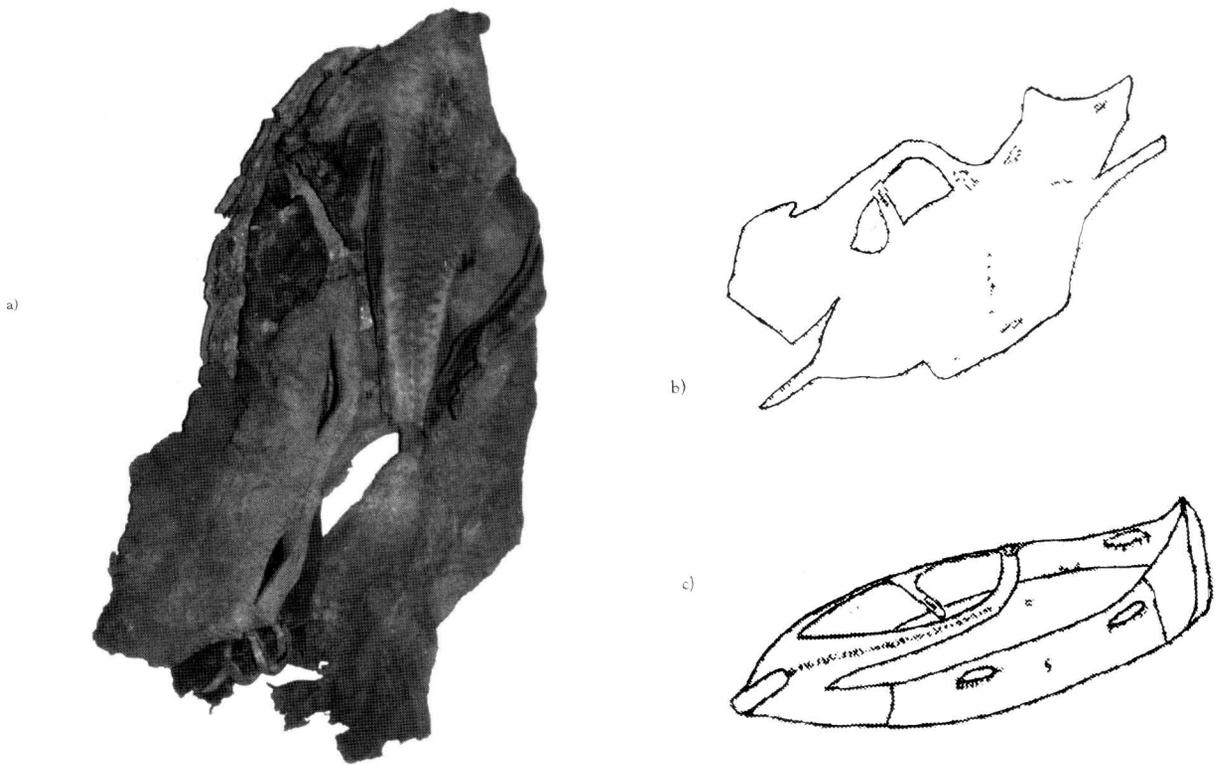


Fig. 6: a near-complete AOP with reconstructed cutting pattern (ONE94)

later contexts. There are, however, a small number of examples of striking resemblances between some styles and 9th/early-10th-century styles from Winchester<sup>26</sup>, Gloucester<sup>27</sup> and Oxford<sup>28</sup>, as well as the possible link between the AOPs and early Irish shoes.

The suggested chronological sequence hints at a relatively early move back into the city in the Cheapside area, contemporary with the Queenhithe development, although it must be remembered that the road surface may well be a tertiary context for the footwear, i.e. later than the discard. A small number of footwear items from the Guildhall Yard, dated provisionally as post-1040<sup>29</sup> do seem to be of an earlier origin (late 10th/early 11th century) and although these could be the footwear of an unusually old-fashioned household they do suggest an earlier start to the cesspit complex than has previously been assumed.

[A detailed account of this proposed sequence is available on request.]

### Interpretation

Who were these early inhabitants of *Lundenburg*? Fig. 7 shows the distribution of estimated foot sizes, the flattened peak suggesting a population containing around equal numbers of males and females, with immature individuals represented from the full age range: Thameside, Cheapside and the Guildhall area throughout the period show similar distributions. Mean sizes for adults are similar to those from modern north European populations and markedly larger than those from earlier and later groups in London. This fits with the estimates of relative body height given from skeletal evidence in the *Human Bodies* exhibition in 1999<sup>30</sup>. Wear patterns do not seem to differ from those discussed by Grew and De Neergaard<sup>31</sup> and very few shoes show signs of modification for

26. J. Thornton 'The Footwear' in M. Biddle (ed) *Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester*. Winchester Studies 7ii (1990) 591-620.

27. C. Goudge 'Leather Objects' in C. Heighway *et al* 'Excavations at 1 Westgate St, Gloucester' *Medieval Archaeol* 23 (1979) 193-6.

28. B. Durham 'Archaeological Investigations at St Aldates, Oxford' *Oxoniensia* 42 (1977) 83-203.

29. Bateman & Porter *op cit* fn 4, 81-2.

30. J Stevenson 'Saxon Bodies' in A. Werner (ed) *Human Bodies* (1998) 50-7.

31. Grew & De Neergaard *op cit* fn 8, 106-7.

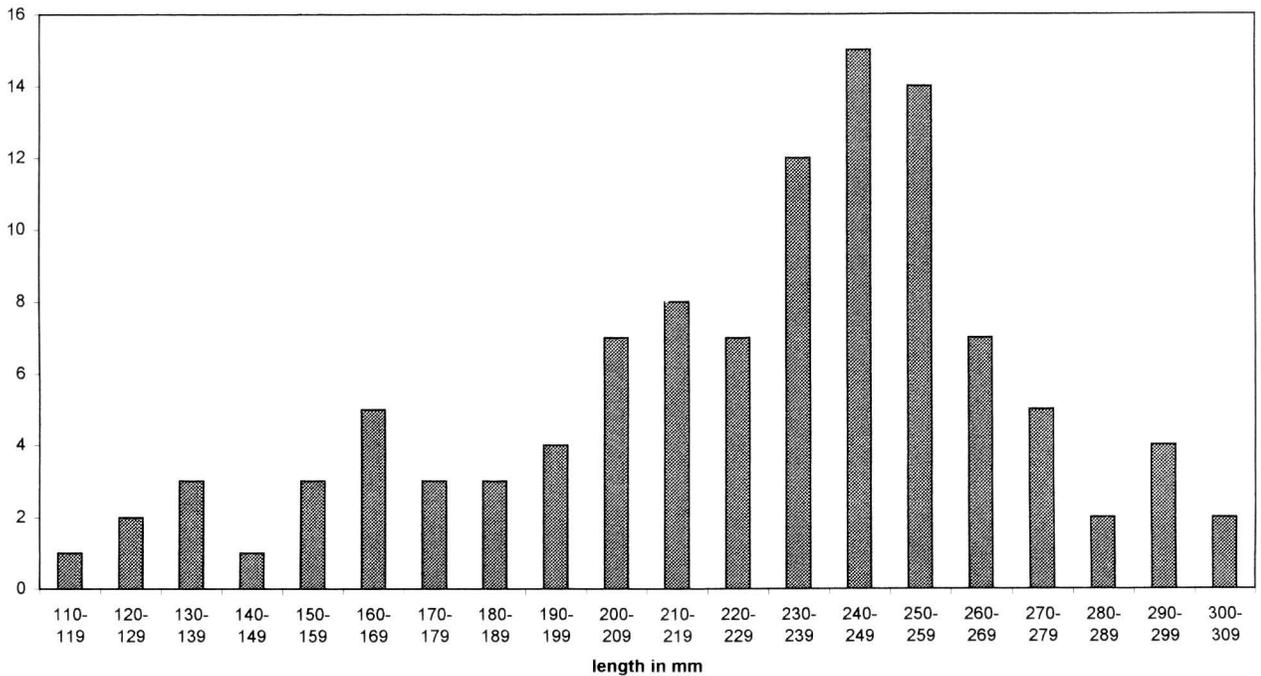


Fig. 7: graph showing foot-size from footwear in London between AD 950 and AD 1050

foot abnormalities. One shoe from Number 1 Poultry is a striking exception: the sole has been detached at the front and loosely knotted back to the upper, which is itself slit, to accommodate a grossly swollen foot. A very well made shoe from Guildhall displayed built-in accommodation for what seems to be a bunion.

What is the relationship between footwear and social identity? First impressions show no clear differences between male and female footwear in overall shoe shape, decoration etc. Closer examination, however, shows a clear association between the presence of the Back Point and the smaller adult sizes, i.e. females. (Table 1).

Length category	Round Back	Back Point	total
up to 209 mm	4	11	15
210-244mm	7	10	17
245mm upwards	10	4	14
totals	21	25	46

Table 1: heel type and foot-length association for the period c. AD 900 to 1050

This correlation has been most unexpected, Back Points being normally interpreted as some kind of ethnic indicator related to Scandinavian identities

or, more prosaically, a form of heel stiffener<sup>32</sup>. Back Points are a low-visibility feature, not portrayed in representations, and further comment must await the extension of recording to other north European assemblages. The association of the floppy toe innovation in the late 11th/early 12th century with male sizes has already been discussed: as far as representations are concerned, at around this time women's feet disappear under folds of skirt whereas up until then, feet and ankles had been clearly visible for both male and female.

Stylistically, there are no 'children's' shoes. The smallest infants shoe is as likely to have special features such as latchets or decorative stripes as an adult shoe. The soles of the smallest shoes are, however, oval rather than tapered, i.e. closer to natural forms. Interestingly, the smallest shoes show the least wear, implying that these shoes were only worn in a carrying situation, perhaps for special occasions. If so, this conveys clear messages about the social importance of stylistically perfect footwear, even for those whose feet did not touch the ground.

Differentials of social status are much harder to explore. Aesthetic judgements based on modern tastes are, of course, inappropriate. Representa-

32. J. Thornton 'Excavated Shoes to 1600' *Museum Assistants Group Monograph* (1973) 4-12.

33. Owen-Crocker *op cit* fn 18, 200.

tions are of limited help here -- Owen-Crocker points out the puzzling lack of differentiation in portrayed body wear from this period, given that the documentary sources imply considerable differentials of wealth and status<sup>34</sup>. To measure quality, an assessment using work done was used, to which was added a valuation based on wear and repair. The outcome suggested that the wearers of shoes in the Thameside locations were markedly wealthier than those of Cheapside where footwear, at least from the mid 10th century onwards, was much more worn and repaired and showed less 'work done'. Some of the earliest footwear, however, from Cheapside (including the AOPS) is very elaborate but much worn and heavily repaired. Footwear from the Guildhall Yard is very mixed in quality, ranging from many very finely made, silk-decorated 'traditional' styles to the cruder but stylistically flamboyant floppy toes and open-work male shoes: further interpretation of this assemblage must await post-excavational work on the cesspit complex from which most of the items come, but does suggest a socially volatile population in this location.

Finally, there is the question of ethnic identities, as displayed through footwear. The earlier footwear is very like that of Winchester and a small assemblage from 8th-9th century Mercian Oxford. By the late 10th century, however, the London footwear with its emphasis on elaborate latchet/toggle fastenings (highly visible) and the presence of experimental fastening types not found elsewhere does seem to signify a strong sense of local identity. The footwear only in basic ways resembles that of late-10th/early-11th-century York which has its own distinctive character. Perhaps more significantly, it is increasingly different from that of Winchester where the basic repertoire varies much less over time and innovation is absent. Neither does it resemble contemporary footwear from Bruges, which is finely made, thread-sewn and stylistically much more like the Guildhall Yard footwear of 50 years later.

The robust, strongly shaped and elaborately fastened 'London latchet' shoes disappear quite suddenly around AD 1040 and are replaced by what could be seen as more Scandinavian styles as seen in the published collections from Schleswig<sup>34</sup>, Oslo<sup>35</sup> and Bergen<sup>36</sup>. Such a claim however must await the extension of the footwear database to European assemblages: it is at least possible that the Bruges

fashions spread simultaneously to England and Scandinavia. At present, the AOPS, which were almost certainly made by one shoemaker, show clear affinities with pre-Scandinavian Irish shoes but this too must await full recording of the Irish collection.

### Concluding remarks

As with all archaeological research, the work with footwear is ongoing. More accurate dating of contexts may well lead to revisions of the chronological sequences discussed in this article, although these are unlikely to be drastic. Further finds of footwear may increase knowledge of the range of techniques and design attributes used by the shoe makers but the sample is so large that this is not likely to contribute more than variants of variants.

More important perhaps is the fact that the London assemblage of footwear for the mid-medieval period forms only one part of a much wider survey being carried out across northern Europe, involving around 3-4,000 items of footwear. Comparisons with York, Bruges, Winchester, Oxford and Gloucester, based on systematic recording, have already been used but this framework is being extended to include assemblages from sites as far apart as Novgorod and St Denis, Paris. This is a turbulent period in north European history, subject to much nationalistic heritage ideology involving 'ethnic' stereotypes and it will be interesting to see to what extent a particularly personalised kind of material culture reflects the boundaries and contrasts which are presented as significant by nationalistic historians and taken for granted as 'real' by their audience.

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34. M. Cinthio 'Skor' *Archaeologica Lundensis* 7 (1976) 7-316.

35. E. Schia 'Sko og Stovler' in *De Arkeologiske utgravninger I Gamlebyen*, Oslo: Sondres Felt (1986) 329-409.

36. A. J. Larsen *Footwear from the Gullskoen area of Bryggen* Bryggen (Bergen) Papers Vol 4 (1992).