

THE OBJECTS OF ANTLER, BONE AND IVORY (Fig. 43) by R. White

Discussion

These objects are mainly luxury or recreational items. Only the toggle (No. 2) and probably the boar's tusk (No. 7) are utilitarian in nature. The size and shape of pig metapodials makes them ideal for use as toggles but an alternative use as bobbins has been suggested for some pierced metapodials found in Saxon contexts, at Northampton.¹

The function of the tusk is not known; the partial removal of one side would not be necessary if the tusk was to be used as a pendant. The perforation and the natural curvature of the tusk suggests that it may have been used in weaving.

Double-edged combs similar to object No. 1 were in use from late Roman times until the 17th-18th century. They suffered a decline in popularity when single edged combs were introduced by the Vikings but regained popularity by the 12th century.² Imported ivory was in use throughout the medieval period.³

Chess was an important game, particularly amongst the higher levels of society, during the medieval period and objects 4 and 5 are thought to be chess pieces. Close parallels have not been found for No. 5, which is smaller than most medieval chessmen. No. 4 is well matched by the pawns in an Italian set of c. 1500. The comparative simplicity of decoration and the lack of protuberances suggest that these pieces may be pawns. The present pawn shape was in use by the 15th century,⁴ but medieval pawns varied considerably in shape and size. Eleven of the 19 pawns found in the Isle of Lewis had octagonal bases.

Catalogue

1. Ivory double-sided one piece comb with broad central reservation.⁵ Slightly rounded ends, one tapering. Fine teeth (23 per 30 mm.) and coarse teeth (12 per 30 mm.) on opposing sides. Some teeth missing. Length 82 mm. Width 59 mm. Thickness varies from 3.5 mm. to 2 mm. at tapering end. SF84, F535/1, Phase 4/2, Group 19.
2. Bone. Pig metapodial with perforation of diam. 6.5 mm. in centre of shaft. Slight polish on shaft. Probably a toggle.⁶ Length 70 mm. SF184, F518/1, Phase 5, Group 23.
3. Bone. Triangular fragment of bone inlay. The base of the triangle and the upper and lower surfaces are sheared, the two sides are sawn. Decorated with 3 excised triangles on upper surface. Possibly from a casket. Length at base 16.5 mm. Sides 14 mm. Width 2 mm. SF254, F903/1, U/S.
4. Ivory gaming piece.⁷ Cylinder with rounded top. Lathe- turned, decorated with incised bands. Height 19 mm. Diameter 13.5 mm. SF260, F907/1, U/S.
5. Antler gaming piece. Octagonal cylinder with rounded top. Irregular facets with smoothed corners. Plugs have been inserted into the cancellous cells at both ends.⁸

Incised bands near base. Roundels comprising a dot and 2 concentric rings on each facet, with irregular positioned incised lines leading towards a central roundel on top. Height 21 mm. Diameter 16.5 mm. SF293, F989/1, Phase 3/1, Group 7.

6. Bone die.⁹ Sides slightly dished. Each unit is represented by a roundel comprising a dot and 2 concentric rings; the roundels are of uniform size and fairly even spacing. 8.5 mm. cube. SF299, F600/4, Phase 3/1-5, Group 12.

7. Boar tusk. Sheared edges where one side has been removed. Both ends broken, broad end across perforation. No visible signs of wear. Implement of unknown function, possibly for weaving. Length 82 mm. SF321, F882/1, Phase 3/2, Group 5.

8. Iron knife with bone handle.¹⁰ One piece handle carved in shape of figure draped in long robes. Broken above a horizontally positioned hand. 14th century. Total length 142 mm. Length of knife 83 mm. SF262, F518/2, Phase 5, Group 23.

Notes

1. G. Oakley and M. Harman, 'The Other Finds: Worked Bone', in J.H. Williams, St. Peter's Street, Northampton: Excavations 1973-1976 (1979).
2. S. Moorhouse, 'Finds from Basing House, Hampshire (c. 1540-1645), pt. 2', *Post-Medieval Archaeol* v (1977), 61.
3. Oakley and Harman, op. cit. 310.
4. H. Murray, *History of Chess* (Oxford 1913), 770.
5. c.f. Oakley and Harman op. cit. 303-311, fig. 137: WB44,45.
6. c.f. Ibid. 313-315, fig. 139: WB65-69.
7. c.f. Ashmolean Museum, Dept. Western Art.
8. A similar plug has been inserted into the base of an undecorated bone heptagonal pawn from Oxford. OX CH ST 1969 Site A sf 1095.
9. c.f. Y. Harvey, 'The Small Finds: The Bone', in C. Platt and R. Coleman Smith *Excavations in Medieval Southampton 1953-1969*, vol.ii (1975), 274, fig. 249, 1945; P. Armstrong, 'Excavations in Sewer Lane, Hull', *East Riding Archaeologist*, iii (1977), fig.29, 150.
10. A similar, ivory knife handle from Shire Ditch, St. Aldates, Oxford, depicts a woman in long robes holding a hawk. (Ashmolean Mus. 1886 13a). For knife, see 'Iron Objects' No. 12, M...