Introduction

This article summarises the results of an excavation undertaken by the Museum of London Archaeology Service in advance of proposed redevelopment (Fig. 1). The investigation, which extended across the entire area of the site, revealed a number of Saxon features. A small amount of pottery and other finds were recovered, which, together with finds from nearby sites, provide clues to the development of settlement in the area that became the Middle Saxon trading centre of *Lundenwic*. Also revealed were natural geological features and post-medieval remains, details of which are available in the archive.

Archaeological background

*Lundenwic* was an important port that functioned as part of a network of trading settlements around the coast of north-west Europe. Over the past two decades excavations at numerous sites in the area around the Strand have uncovered evidence for settlement over an area of up to 60 ha. In
Addition to roads and buildings, evidence has been found for a range of industries and for both regional and long-distance trade. The results of this work suggest that Lundenwic developed into a major settlement in the later 7th century, and that its heyday was in the 8th century. It was abandoned in the mid 9th century, probably at least partly as the result of the Viking attacks.

The nature of the Middle Saxon settlement from c. AD 640 onwards is relatively well understood. Much less is known of activity in the area prior to this, and the question of whether there was an extramural Saxon settlement in place when the church of St Paul’s was founded in AD 604 remains unresolved. As will be discussed below, however, there is now some evidence for activity towards the western end of Long Acre that may date to the Early/Middle Saxon transition.

Natural topography and site location

The present ground surface between the Thames and High Holborn, as shown on Ordnance Survey maps, indicates that Long Acre to the north of the Royal Opera House is the highest point (c. 24 m OD) of a small hill. To the south the modern ground level slopes down towards the River Thames, while to the west and south-west it slopes down towards a former watercourse that ran southwards along the line of St Martin’s Lane/Charing Cross Road to the River Thames, and the overall topography in the Saxon period was probably very similar.

The site of 8–9 Long Acre, therefore, lay on higher ground overlooking the watercourse at St Martin’s Lane. The subsoil comprises river terrace deposits with well-defined bands of sand and sandy gravel. The basement of the former building had removed any land surfaces across the entire site truncating the surface of the underlying river terrace deposits to between 17.17 m and 18.51 m OD.

Results of the excavation

Despite extensive truncation, the lower parts of some archaeological features were of sufficient depth to have survived; both in the sections at the edge of the excavation and as isolated cut features within the investigation area (Fig. 2).

Five Saxon pits were found at the edges of the excavation, while a barrel-lined well was located at the approximate centre of the site. Together they yielded 28 sherds of Saxon pottery (566 g, 0.07 EVE). Cess/rubbish pit [14] is probably the earliest datable feature, with 11 sherds of which four are sandstone-tempered (Fig. 3), while the others contain varying amounts of organic matter. Rubbish pit [49] contained a small sherd with mixed sand temper (fabric code ESMS), two...
The Saxon pottery

Although Middle Saxon pottery has been relatively well researched, little is known of the Early Saxon pottery of the London region. Over the past few years, however, a number of recent studies have shown that there is a consistent sequence of fabrics in the 5th, 6th and early 7th centuries. Most of the pottery from the London region is handmade, contains mineral temper, sometimes with organic inclusions, and has a black, gritty appearance. Within this period, however, the amount of organic temper became more abundant, and chaff-tempered wares became the dominant type. Recent analyses have demonstrated that while chaff-tempered wares span the Early and Middle Saxon periods, there is little, if any, overlap in the coarseware fabrics. This is an important discovery, since in most parts of the country it is almost impossible to reliably distinguish handmade, black-fired pottery of the 5th to 7th centuries from that of the 7th to 9th centuries.

As a result of these studies it was, therefore, possible to suggest that some of the pottery fabrics found at the present site, that adjacent to it, and another site in Long Acre were unusual for Lundenwic, and that they might be of Early Saxon date. These are all body sherds that are in generally poor condition, suggesting redeposition. Three samples from LGC00 were selected for analysis to compare their petrological characteristics with those of Early and Middle Saxon coarseware fabrics from the London area.

The most distinctive Early Saxon fabric group for the region comprises a range of sandstone-tempered wares (ware group ESST), which have a characteristic ‘sparkly’ appearance. These account for between 15% and 40% of the sherds recovered from sites that have been studied. They seem to have been most common from the mid 5th to mid 6th centuries, going out of use in the early 7th century, if not sooner. Two main types have been defined for the London area, both of which are represented at 8–9 Long Acre (four sherds).

The first group is varied, but is characterised by a fine-grained sandstone that has a sugary appearance. The sherds from LGC00 fall into fabric type ESSTD, which has abundant evenly-
sized inclusions. The sample examined contains a quartzose sand, which in thin section is seen to consist almost entirely of fragments of a single sandstone type and its constituent quartz grains. The sandstone is an orthoquartzite, in which the original quartz sand grains have acted as centres for the deposition of more silica, leading to crystallisation around the original grains (whose boundaries cannot be seen in thin section). To date, sherds from nine other Early Anglo-Saxon vessels with a temper that predominantly contains fragments of this sandstone and quartz derived from it have been examined; most are from a site in Harmondsworth, while two are from a site in Hammersmith. This does not prove that the fabric was produced in this part of the Thames valley but it does suggest that the vessels were made to the west of Lundenwic.

The second fabric group (ESSTC) is characterised by fragments of a coarse-grained sandstone which has been identified in thin section as being lower Carboniferous Millstone Grit. In this sample, however, a small quantity of oolitic limestone fragments similar to those outcropping in the Cotswolds are also present, and so it was recorded as fabric ESSTCOL. Millstone Grit is a major constituent of many fluvo-glacial sands in northern England, but the oolitic limestone inclusions preclude such an exotic source. This mixture of Jurassic limestone and Millstone Grit is in fact found in some of the gravels of north-western Oxfordshire and north-eastern Gloucestershire, and probably occurs in glacial deposits closer to London. This fabric type too has been found in samples of Early Anglo-Saxon pottery from various sites in the Thames valley, again predominantly Harmondsworth but also Hammersmith and Tulse Hill.

In neither case can we yet use the thin section analysis to pinpoint the place of production but both wares contain distinctive inclusions that are absent from Middle Saxon coarsewares from Lundenwic.

Four other sherds could be of Early or Middle Saxon date. Two of them are sand-tempered, one fine ([20], fabric SSAND?), the other coarser with mixed rounded and angular sand ([48], ESMS). The others (fabric CHFQ) contain organic matter with coarse-grained sandstone and quartz derived from this sandstone. The character of these grains suggests that they derive from deposits of Lower Carboniferous date (Millstone Grit) but whether they are detrital grains or derived from a millstone is not known. Chemical analysis suggests a local or regional source, as the composition of the sample is similar to finds of chaff-tempered ware from other Thames valley sites, especially two samples from Staines and Barking Abbey.

In addition there are eight chaff-tempered sherds in fabrics that are more typically Middle Saxon (fabrics CHAF, CHSF).

The site also produced eight sherds of wheel-thrown greyware, three of which were examined in thin section and using chemical analysis. Despite their visual similarity, all three have distinctly different characteristics in thin section, although, apart from indicating that one of the samples came from a region of Cretaceous or later rocks, the thin-sections did not give any indication of the likely source of the vessels. The chemical data were compared with those of other wheel-thrown continental imports of Early and Middle Saxon date from various sites in Lundenwic and beyond. The three Long Acre samples differ from most of the other samples in that they contain moderate to abundant quartz sand. Analysis shows that the compositions were more similar to each other than to the majority of other imported wares. There were, however, three exceptions: two are imported vessels from Early Anglo-Saxon burials at Coddenham and Hadleigh in Suffolk and the third is a sample from an imported vessel from Drury Lane. All three vessels belong to the same group of Frankish imported wares dated early in the Lundenwic sequence, if not pre-dating it.

Discussion

The site has produced handmade pottery typical of types found on Early Anglo-Saxon sites in the Thames basin, and wheel-thrown greywares which are also likely to pre-date most of the imported pottery found in Lundenwic. The sandstone-tempered wares could well be contemporary with those found at Clerkenwell, Hammersmith and in the Harmondsworth area, which mainly date to between AD 450–550. Pit [14], which contained chaff-tempered wares but no imports, could, therefore, either date to the 6th
century, or be a 7th-century feature with a few residual 5th- or 6th-century sherds. The other pits, which contained chaff-tempered and imported wares, should date to the late 6th or 7th centuries, but the imported greywares from the well are more typical of late 7th and 8th centuries. There are two possible interpretations for the earlier pottery: either it originated in a rural settlement which preceded, and was eventually subsumed by the trading centre, or it indicates that the trading centre itself originated during the same period as the foundation of St Paul’s cathedral at the beginning of the 7th century.

It would not be surprising for the cathedral to have acted as a stimulus for trade and contact with the Frankish empire but the Long Acre site holds out the possibility, which only future excavations can test, that there was some form of transitional Early/Middle Saxon settlement in the area, and that some form of trading place was in existence at the time of, or soon after, the Augustinian mission. To conclude, the investigation has led to some unexpected and important discoveries, and has demonstrated that it is sometimes the nature, rather than the number, of finds that is most significant.

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1. Site code LGC00; TQ 3011 8088. The excavation was carried out by Robert Cowie, the scientific pottery analysis by Alan Vince, and the text was prepared and collated by Lyn Blackmore. Specialist information on the building material, plant remains and animal bone was supplied by Ian Betts, Ann David and Alan Pipe respectively. Steve Caldwell made the thin-sections and Dr N. Walsh, Royal Holloway College, London, undertook the ICPS analysis. The finds were drawn by Faith Vardy and the maps by Kenneth Lymer.

2. R. Cowie 8–9 Long Acre and 16 Garrick Lane, London WC2, City of Westminster: an Archaeological Post-Excavation Assessment, MoLAS (2001). The archive can be consulted by appointment at Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7ED.


10. L. Blackmore in R. Cowie and L. Blackmore in prep., Early and Middle Saxon rural settlement in the London region, for MoLAS Monograph Series. See also M. Laidlaw, and M. Laidlaw and L. Mepham ‘Early Saxon pottery’ in P. Andrews and A. Crockett, Wessex Archaeology Rep. 10 (1996) 33–38 and 87–91. This work has included thin-