

Assessment of Fired Clay and Other Finds from Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire (BSMM-05)

Alan Vince

A collection of fired clay and a small number of other finds were submitted for identification and assessment.

The finds consist of copper alloy, ceramic building material and stone together with an assemblage of daub which came from a flat wattle panel from a rectilinear structure.

Description

Ceramic Building Material

A single fragment of decorated floor tile was submitted. The fragment, from context 113, has a thin two-colour design in which the slip is barely sunk below the surface of the tile (i.e. less than 0.5mm). Tiles made with this technique were produced in the later 14th and 15th centuries, for example at Penn, in Buckinghamshire (1980), and Stoke, on the outskirts of Coventry (Chatwin 1936). The fabric was examined at x20 magnification and consists of a fine oxidized clay matrix containing a well-sorted sand composed of calcareous grains, composite grains (probably a fine sandstone but too fine-textured to identify) and sparse rounded, matt quartz grains derived from the Trias. More detail could be revealed by the production of a thin section. This is a distinctive fabric but without comparative work or thin section evidence it cannot be provenanced. The British Museum have carried out a study of midland floor tile industries using Neutron Activation Analysis and it would be possible to compare this fragment with that dataset using Inductively-Coupled Plasma Spectroscopy and mass spectrometry (ICP-MS).

Copper Alloy

A copper alloy pin was recovered from Trench 1 (unstratified). The pin head was produced by wrapping a spiral of wire around one end and the impressions of this wire survive. Such pins were produced in large quantities in the late and post-medieval periods. L: 43mm. D: 1.5mm.

A strip of copper alloy was recovered from context 405. The strip is undecorated with parallel, well-finished edges. It is broken at either end and has been bent and twisted. B: 10mm wide, L: 48mm, Th: 1.0mm.

The Alan Vince Archaeology Consultancy, 25 West Parade, Lincoln, LN1 1NW

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Fired Clay

An assemblage of fired clay fragments was recorded from context 105. The fragments mostly have impressions from wattles, woven alternately over and under a series of vertical stakes. The outer surface survives on several fragments and is rough, with finger impressions surviving, but flat. The fragments have been burnt and in some cases the burning can be shown to have taken place whilst the wattles were in place, since the impressions are lined with a darkened, soot-rich halo.

The wattle impressions range from c.15mm to c.30mm in diameter, and the wall thickness, from the outer surface to the vertical wattles at the centre is c.60mm.

The fabric is sandy (abundant rounded quartz grains, mostly of Triassic origin) and contains large unsorted pebbles, composed of flint, well-rounded fragments of Triassic origin, chalk and a blue/grey micrite (either Rhaetic or Lower Jurassic). These characteristics identify the clay as a boulder clay, probably obtained from close to the site. However, one fragment of dark vesicular slag was noted, which seems to indicate some admixture of temper, since the daub was not heated at a high enough temperature to vitrify any naturally-present iron-rich inclusions.

The fired clay comes from a straight wall, and is therefore more likely to come from a building than a structure such as an oven, although the daub from some late Roman corn drying kilns indicates that they had rectilinear superstructures.

Stone

A whetstone of Norwegian Ragstone (a fine blue-grey phyllite, mined near Eidsborg in southern Norway) was recovered from context 405. The stone has been heavily worn on both flat surfaces and is broken at one end. Such stones were imported to Eastern England from the 10th or 11th century until the late medieval period. L: 102mm; B: 24mm; Th: 6mm tapering to a point.

A fragment of stone was recovered from context 109. The stone is red-brown fine sandstone composed of quartz grains, with minor muscovite and sparse calcareous bivalve shell fragments (including one fragmentary ornamented shell). One irregular rounded surface has been burnt but otherwise there is no sign of use. Probably a burnt pebble.

Assessment

Further Work

There is potential for undertaking further work on the floor tile, but it is inappropriate to carry out such work on a small fragment with an unidentifiable design.

The copper alloy objects are probably unstable and would require a conservation assessment before deposition in a museum repository. However, it is doubtful if the pin

deserves such treatment whilst the treatment of the strip should be determined on the basis of the date and interpretation of its archaeological context.

The daub has potential for the study of ceramics, in that it can be assumed that it was obtained fairly close to the site (i.e. within a mile or so at most) and it is therefore an indication of the character of the clay sources in the area. A sample should certainly be retained for future scientific analysis but, again, there is no strong benefit to carrying out such analysis at present, in terms of increased knowledge of the archaeology of the site.

Retention

The stone from context 109 could be discarded, together with the unstratified copper alloy pin, but the remaining finds should be retained for future study.

Appendix 1

Trench	Context	REFNO	class	Cname	Subfabric	Form	Description	Use	Condition	Part	Nosh	NoV	Weight
	105		FCLAY	FCLAY	CHALKY BOULDER CLAY	DAUB	WATTLE IMPRESSIONS;ROUGH EXT FLAT SURFACES		BURNT WITH SOOT HALO AROUND SOME WATTLES BURNT	BS	15	1	2291
	109		STONE	STONE		GEO	BURNT AND CRACKED PEBBLE			BS	1	1	61
	405		STONE	STONE	NORWEGIAN RAG	HONE		WORN ON BOTH SIDES		BS	1	1	30
	405		COPP	COPP		STRIP			BENT AND BROKEN	BS	1	1	2
TR1	US		COPP	COPP		PIN	WIRE-WOUND HEAD (MISSING)			BS	1	1	0.5
	113		CBM	MTIL		FLOOR	2-COLOUR SLIP DECORATION			BS	1	1	9

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Reference List

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- Eames, E S (1980) *Catalogue of Medieval Glazed Earthenware Tiles in the British Museum*.
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