

Assessment of Stone from Sibsey Lane, Boston (BSLP07)

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A small collection of stone from an archaeological intervention at Sibsey Lane, Boston, undertaken by Lindsey Archaeological Services Ltd was submitted for identification and assessment. The stone is probably waste from the production of Norwegian Ragstone honestones and, as such, evidence for direct contact with southern Norway in the 11th to 14th centuries.

Description

The stone fragments come from contexts 100 (1 piece) and 117 (9 fragments). The stones are a grey micaceous schist or phyllite, almost certainly Norwegian Ragstone aka Eidsborg schist or one of the finer rocks from the same area (blue phyllite), from the Telemark area of southern Norway. Whetstones from this area are common finds in eastern England from the later 11th to at least the 14th centuries (Crosby & Mitchell 1987; Ellis 1969; Moore 1978; 1983). The whetstones are known from London (Moore 1986; Pritchard 1991); Hampshire (Ellis & Moore 1990); Yorkshire (Morey & Dunham 1953); East Anglia (Ellis & Moore 1984) as well as Lincoln (Moore unpublished reports 1981a; 1981b and 1991).

However, these Boston fragments are too small to have been whetstones or honestones nor do they show any sign of being worked into a whetstone shape or being fragments of such objects. They are, however, very similar to material from the backfill of the city ditch at Ludgate Hill, City of London, where excavations by the Museum of London discovered a large dump of such waste, in deposits dating to the early 14th century. This material was interpreted as being the waste from whetstone manufacture, implying that the schist was being imported to London in and unworked state and was being worked on the outskirts of the City either for use in the city or for re-export either around the coast or overland.

Assessment

The only other possible interpretation of these fragments is that they were offcuts from roof slates. However, the rock cleaves in two planes unlike slates which have only one well-developed cleavage plane. Furthermore, the finds come from the fill of the town ditch and were not associated with any other possible building debris, either from construction or demolition.

The identity of the stone ought to be confirmed, preferably both through thin section analysis and comparison with sections of definite Norwegian Ragstone hone and through visual comparison, by sending samples to Norway for examination by geologists familiar with the Eidsborg geology.

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Although a larger sample is required to confirm the suggestion, it does seem likely that the Sibsey Lane finds are from similar activity to that documented at Ludgate Hill in London. This would indicate that ships carrying raw Eidsborg schist were unloading at Boston and that the stone was being worked there for distribution to the east midlands. Should a large collection become available, it would confirm the presence of this hitherto unknown craft and trade in Boston and add to our knowledge of the workings of the whetstone trade in the medieval period.

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