Post Roman Iron

Site code: ONE94, CID90

Undated

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Number 1 Poultry: Post-Roman Iron Richenda Goffin (MoLAS)

Introduction

The iron artefacts were retrieved from certain areas of the site using two methods, by hand through conventional excavation techniques, and by an organised programme of metal detecting the spoil from known contexts. If any doubt occurred over the provenance of an artefact, it was deemed unstratified.

All the material apart from the hammerscale was x-rayed during the course of the excavation.

The quantification of the material shown in the table below includes iron objects of Saxon, medieval, and post-medieval date, and also material of an unknown date which may on further examination be found to be Roman (much of the iron recovered from Area 12 is almost certainly of Roman date).

Area	Hand retrieved	Metal detected	Total
Unstratified	20	51	71
Evaluation	6	4	10
Area 1	145	0	145
Area 2	11	0	11
Areas 3 and 4	1	0	1
Area 5	11	23	34
Area 8	103	93	196
Area 9	90	81	171
Area 10	94	45	139
Area 11	85	26	111
Area 7/12	64	154	218
TOTAL	**630**	**477**	**1107**

Table: Iron objects from Poultry

Area / type	Hand retrieved	Metal detected	Total
Unstratified Iron/lead, iron copper	0	3	3
Area 1/ Iron/bone	1	0	1
Area 5 Iron/lead	1	0	1
Area 8 Iron/lead Iron/bone	1	1	2
Area 9 Iron/bone	2	0	2
Area 10 Iron/bone/wood/copper	4	0	4
Area 11 Iron/wood/bone	3	0	3
Area 7/12 Iron/wood/copper	2	1	3
TOTAL	**14**	**5**	**19**

Table: Iron composite objects from Poultry

Condition

Much of the post-Roman metalwork was fragmentary, with little being identifiable before radiography. However there were exceptions to this, such as the Saxo-Norman knife blade <2834>, which is uncorroded and very well preserved.

The assemblage

Some of the iron objects were found in deposits which contained both Roman and post-Roman material. This has impeded positive identification of many of the objects at the assessment stage.

Late Saxon/early medieval

Note that samples of hammerscale are discussed as part of the slag assessment. In addition fragments of iron waste and slag were recovered and have been accessioned.

A large quantity of iron objects was recovered from the site, but at this stage it is unclear in some instances whether certain items are residual and Roman in date. A provisional listing providing basic object types is as follows:

(a) Knives

Knives form the largest part of the iron assemblage. A variety of blade types were recovered, showing a wide range of sizes and styles. The best example is <2834> which is complete, and is inlaid with brass and copper alloy decoration.

A second decorated blade <777> shows evidence of twisted rope-like inlay parallel to its blade back, probably in copper alloy. Other knife blades were <745>, <1025>, <1106>, <1137>, <1450>, <1898>, <1991>, <2038>, <2478>, <2836>, <3067>, <3135>, <3174>, <3454>, <3554>, <3620>, <5174> and <5654>. Further possible blades were identified as <455>, <733>, <1576>,<2462> and <3791>. Object <1991> showed evidence of having a steel cutting edge.

(b) Tools

Other tools and domestic implements which have been provisionally identified are as follows:
Awl <2950>
?Chisel <1005>
Gouge or other tool <3899>
Pintle <3022>
?Padlock <3726>
Handle with spiral twist <3456> , handle(?) with curved terminal <1779>, <1109>.
Key <2053>, <2154>, ? <2465>, <2737>, ?<3010> ?<3411> (looped terminal), ? <3532>,
?Hinge <2111>, <3001>
Chain <1907>
Goads <4388><4470> (both may be Roman)

(c) Horse equipment

Spur fragment <366>
Horseshoe fragment <1954>
Bridlebit? <1639>

(d) Domestic and Personal objects

Hooked tag <2929>,<2982>
Pin <3128>, <3139>
?Needle <3770>
Buckleplate <2938>
Buckle <3018>, ?<3316>
Casket mount <2971>

(e) Weapons and armour

Further examination may prove these items to be of Roman date.

<2742> Socketed spear
<2391> Socketed spear
<2946> Socketed spear

Other iron objects were recovered from CID90 which may be of relevance. They include knives <391>, <647>, needle <23>, buckle <868>, dresshook <308>, tools <155>, <614>, arrowhead <152> and other artefacts which may be subsequently identified. Artefacts worthy of further investigation were also found at CED89, such as <109> horseshoe, and knife blades <134> and <159>.

Medieval

Few iron artefacts are identifiable as being intrinsically of the medieval period. The exceptions to this are two finger rings; <4888>, decorated with a small face on the top, and <5540>. A horseshoe <4557> may also be of this date.

Some of the iron coffin fittings may be of medieval rather than postmedieval date, but these have described in the post-medieval section of the assessment.

Additional accessions from CID90 include key <130>, horseshoe <21> and a knife blade with possible cutlers mark <15>.

Post-medieval

A total of 118 accessions consisting of iron coffin handles, studs and associated fittings were recovered from the burial ground of St Benet Sherehog. The majority of these artefacts dated to after the Great Fire. The coffin handles demonstrate a wide range of different sizes, but many of them were of uniform shape, and undecorated. Although most were semi-circular in shape, some of them were squared. Examples of more decorated handles were present, such as <231> and <217> which had slightly elaborate terminals. Radiography showed that <272> also consisted of plate fragments which were inscribed. Little other post-medieval material was recovered, although some of the unstratified accessions may belong to this period.

The potential of the material

Late Saxon/early medieval

1. Evidence of tenth and eleventh-century metalworking is indicated by the remains of workshops and industrial hearths identified in the stratigraphic/land-use data. Indications of iron manufacturing may be detected by the presence of large quantities of slag and hammerscale. In addition artefacts relating to the manufacture of iron artefacts may be found, such as anvils, tongs, punches etc.

Ironworking in this area is well attested in the documentary evidence for the later part of the medieval period. Part of Cheapside and the western end of Poultry was characterised by an intensive concentration of iron manufacturing and ironmongering during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, and this was a continuation of a tradition which had started much earlier. If the archaeological remains are substantial enough, it may be possible to compare individual industrial structures with later properties which are known to have existed for the same purpose, and chart changes in function over time.

The site provides an unprecedented opportunity to study the extent and organisation of metalworking in this period and to relate metalworking artefacts with possible workshops and forges. Although evidence of Saxo-Norman ironworking has been recovered from other excavations in the City, and some analytical work undertaken, the results have been limited because of the lack of directly associated land-use evidence (Bayley, J et al, 1991). It is proposed that a comprehensive study of the metal-working industry can be undertaken, similar to that done on the 9th to 11th-century metalworking site at 16-22 Coppergate

(Ottaway 1992). Comparable material from nearby Category 3a sites (CID90 etc) should be considered for summary inclusion with the Poultry assemblage. It may prove appropriate to combine the publication of analytical work on the material from Poultry with the results of a parallel study of metalworking artefacts from the middle Saxon settlement at Lundenwic.

2. It may be possible to determine other kinds of related manufacturing which took place alongside iron-working, but involving non-ferrous metalworking. This may help to answer questions about the organisation of workshops, and their relationship with each other and other related craftsmen such as boneworkers.

3. The iron artefacts dating to this period should be considered as part of the material culture of the inhabitants of the site in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Objects may supply information on household items such as furniture fittings and locks, to more personal items such as dress fittings. Identification of the objects and their distribution on site may contribute to determining the function of certain structures, such as whether they were private dwellings or workshops.

4. Iron objects may contribute information on other types of manufacturing activity such as leatherworking. Particular types and sizes of knife blades may suggest suitability for particular specialist activities such as wood, bone and leatherworking, rather than general domestic tasks.

5. Iron objects may provide information on activities such as cloth production or animal husbandry.

6. The quality of the artefacts may provide information on the wealth and status of the occupants during this period.

7. The quality of workmanship of the artefacts may contribute to an understanding of the depth of knowledge and skill which the craftsmen possessed when working with their materials. Metallographic analysis of particular objects may provide evidence of techniques which were deliberately used to make the most effective use of the raw material. For example, did any of the iron artefacts have cutting edges made from steel? Is there evidence of pattern welding?

8. Waste fragments can be classified as either residues remaining after the ore has been smelted, or residues which remain after an artefact has been fabricated during the smithing process. Identification of these artefacts will provide information on which particular processes were occurring on site.

Medieval

9. A study of the iron tools may provide evidence of the different types of metalworking processes being undertaken during this period.

10. The spatial distribution of the ferrous and non-ferrous artefacts will be analysed, to try and establish the organisation of the workshops and the inter-relationship of craftsmen.

11. The extent and location of any metalworking workshops may have changed from the early medieval period, and these two historical phases should be compared.

12. Identification of unfinished artefacts may give some indication of the types of objects which were being fabricated, and if similar artefacts were found in deposits associated with possible trade outlets, this would confirm a direct link between manufacturing and retailing of objects.

13. A study of the iron artefacts should include an investigation into whether any objects were found associated with the many ironmongering shops which are documented between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

Finished artefacts may supply information on the types of objects which were being sold in the retail outlets and markets of Cheapside and Poultry. Comparison of artefact types may show some specialisms in trading types related to particular areas, which could tie in with documentary evidence. Individual shops are known to have specialised in the sale of knives, spurs and horse equipment, and armour, and this might be reflected in both the archaeology and the artefacts themselves.

The history of the metalworking and associated retail activity may be studied from the artefacts which remain, so that some overall picture of the types of iron objects which were being produced and sold through the years across the site may be established. Four main groups of trades and their locations have been identified through the documentary record (see Keene, The Walbrook Study), and can be summarised as specialised traders in Cheapside, producers/processors in the side streets close to Cheapside and using it as a commercial outlet, distributive traders in streets such as Poultry, and specialised traders in side streets such as Bucklersbury and Walbrook.

14. The duration of metalworking in the Poultry area may be gauged by the archaeological phasing and associated dating. This should also be compared with the documentary evidence, where it has been noted that there is an evolution away from the production of artefacts to the distribution of them as finished products in the Cheapside and Walbrook area. A study of the iron artefacts may indicate when this change took place and where manufacturing survived the longest. Documentary evidence also suggests that there was a move away from the trade in iron goods altogether by c 1500, replaced by the distribution of consumer products such as meat and groceries. This change may be reflected in the archaeological record.

These questions may contribute to a discussion on larger social and economic issues, such as the decline in population after the Black Death, and the increasing value of property which forced production areas to move to less expensive parts of the city, so that the area itself became increasingly dominated by the trade in luxury items such as precious metals, spices and expensive textiles.

15. Domestic artefacts and personal belongings may be associated with the mercantile population (for example in some of the large stone houses behind the street and shop frontages along Poultry) and may provide important information on their material culture.

16. Some of the objects recovered may provide information on the aristocratic households who are known to have established their wardrobes in the area. These repositories acted as depots for certain types of goods such as clothing, furniture and valuables, before they were distributed to individual properties elsewhere. High quality iron artefacts may be present in the form of composite items such as fittings for furniture. Servat's Tower was used as a wardrobe by Queen Isabel in the fourteenth century.

17. Coffin furniture and fittings associated with the burials at St Benet Sherehog will provide additional evidence of burial practices during the medieval period, which can be compared with other cemeteries. These artefacts may also provide information on the affluence of those who were buried.

Post-medieval

18. Any post-medieval evidence of the trade or manufacture of iron goods should be considered in light of documentary evidence indicating that manufacture had ceased by c. 1500.

19. Artefacts relating to other trades may be present in the archaeological record, such as grocers, scriveners, bookbinders, organmakers, haberdashers, and skinners, all of which are documented as being present at Poultry in the sixteenth century. The objects may contribute to establishing the extent of particular occupational specialisms across the site by spatial distribution, and related to documentary research.

20. High quality iron artefacts associated with aristocratic households, and foreign and indigenous merchants may be present, and provide information on both the technical abilities of the craftsmen and on the goods and chattels of the owners of these possessions.

21. In the later part of the post-medieval period, tools associated with such industries as sugar refining may provide additional evidence for the change in industrial and commercial land-use.

Revised research aims

1. The Late Saxon/early medieval iron blade <2834> with copper and brass inlay is a remarkable object which is worthy of full analytical investigation. It is a particularly well preserved example of a tanged blade with fine bichrome wire in copper and brass inlaid parallel to the cutting edge. The wires have been twisted and hammered to form a herringbone effect.

The blade is an important addition to a small group of particularly high quality knives of the ninth to eleventh century which have already been found in London (Pritchard, 1991). Stylistically, it resembles a small knife of tenth century date excavated from Peninsula House (Pritchard, 1991). A second blade with inlay <777> may also be worthy of further metallographic analysis.
The new finds provide further evidence of a common workshop tradition associated with the London area at this time which merits further research.

Bibliography

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