

A GROUP OF LATE ANGLO-SAXON HOOKED TAGS FROM CHESHIRE

by D. W. Griffiths

The Grosvenor Museum, Chester, holds a collection of thirteen hooked tags, only one of which has been published before in detail (Meols No. 1, below). All consist of a plate with holes for attachment to cloth or leather and a hook or the remains of one. Eight of the hooked tags are from Meols on the north Wirral coast and five are from Chester. Eleven are of copper alloy and two are of lead alloy.

The hooked tags from Meols were recovered during the 19th century when increased coastal erosion exposed archaeological contexts dating back at least to the late Iron Age (Hume 1863, 22; Bu'Lock 1960, 1-2). As the sea destroyed areas of the north Wirral coast, local antiquarians, of whom the most prolific writers were the Rev. Abraham Hume, Henry Ecroyd Smith and Charles Potter, conducted individual campaigns to recover the large number of artefacts being picked up by local people on the beach. Meols No. 1 (see below) is part of the Mrs. Longueville Collection and was probably recovered relatively early. Hume records Mrs. Longueville (of Hoylake Parsonage) as having a collection of objects from the Meols shore as early as 1846. The others, which are mostly part of the Potter Collection, are likely to have been recovered later in the century since Potter's main contribution was made in the 1870's. All of the Meols examples except No. 1 almost certainly came to the attention of the antiquarians after 1863 since they do not appear in Hume's *Ancient Meols* of that year.

The hooked tags from Chester have been recovered in recent excavations by the Excavations Section of the Grosvenor Museum. They are held by the section pending final publication with other aspects of Anglo-Saxon Chester in the *Grosvenor Museum Excavation and Survey Reports* series.

CATALOGUE

MEOLS No. 1

Ex colln Mrs. Longueville 358.S.1913

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag, comprising a triangular plate with two indentations in the upper or shorter edge, the longer edges terminating in an integral hook which

is complete. There are two circular attachment holes. One side only (the side towards which the hook is upturned) is decorated with sixteen punched ring-and-dot motifs in an apparently random pattern. Four incised lines which form two converging strands cross at the centre of the short side of the triangle, emphasising the indentations along the edge. The back is plain.

Length: 40 mm.

Width: 16 mm.

Context: Unknown

Publications:

Hume, 1863, pl. ix 20

Bu'Lock, 1960, 4, fig. 2g; 1972, 20, fig. 3g.

MEOLS No. 2

ex Potter colln

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag consisting of a triangular plate upon which the worn remains of tracer-punched decoration are visible. The decoration on the plate seems to have been two plain fields separated by a plain axial line; the plate is bordered with a punched line. The two attachment holes are surrounded by similar. There is an integral hook which turns away from the decorated side of the plate. The back is plain.

Length: 17 mm.

Width: 11.5 mm.

Context: Unknown

Unpublished.

MEOLS No. 3

ex old collns

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag in an advanced state of decay. It comprises a triangular plate pierced by two attachment holes which have been opened up by damage. The hook is missing. There is no obvious decoration.

Length: 17.2 mm.

Width: 9.4 mm.

Context: Unknown

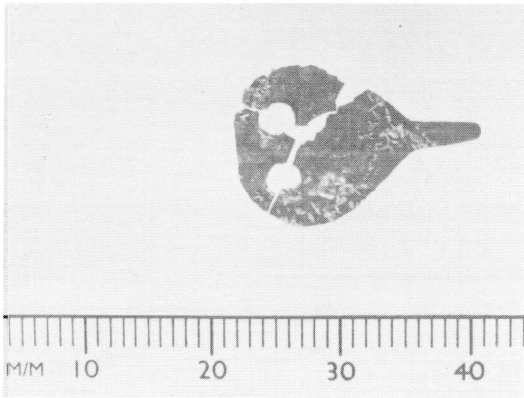
Unpublished.

MEOLS No. 4

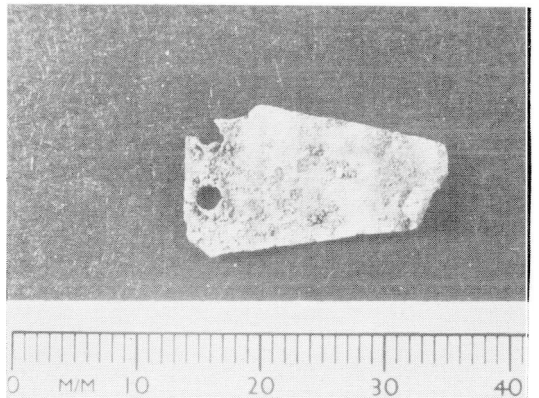
ex Potter colln

Description:

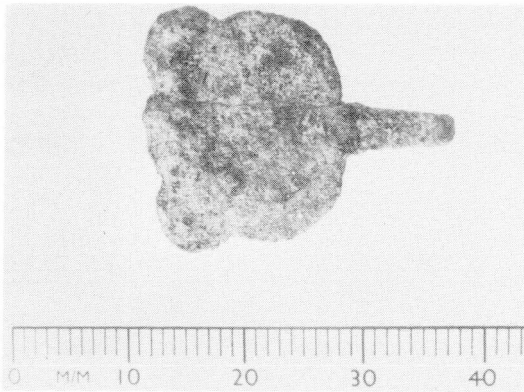
Lead-alloy hooked tag with inlaid decoration, comprising a circular plate with an extension for a hook, now missing. The plate has two projecting lugs, one of



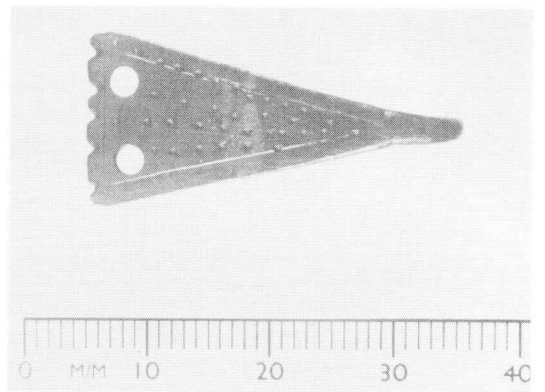
Goss Street
SF 1212



Greyfriars Court
SF 80



Old Market Hall
SF 1047



Greyfriars Court
SF 403



Hunter Street School
SF 1083

(Photographs taken by D. Griffiths, with the permission of the Grosvenor Museum).

which is damaged, each pierced by an attachment hole. The decoration is contained by a circular, raised field with a plain border around the edge of the plate. The border is edged by a groove, in part of which is niello inlay. The inlaid motif within the central field has been damaged and only part of the niello inlay remains. The motif is a swastika-like design with each of the four arms terminating in a small triangle. These triangles are joined to the border by lines perpendicular to the arms of the central motif. The extension for the hook has a simple base on the circumference of the plate and is plain. The back is also plain.

Length: 17.2 mm.

Width: 11.7 mm.

Context: Unknown

Unpublished

MEOLS No. 5

ex Potter colln

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag consisting of an elliptical plate with an extension which terminates in a hook. There are two attachment holes, one of which is in the centre of the design on the plate, the other of which interrupts the design and hence may be a secondary feature. On the edge of the plate are the remains of two projecting lugs, which formerly represented two further attachment holes. The plate is bordered by a single strand and divided into three fields by three single strands radiating from the central hole. Each panel is filled with indistinguishable interlace, consisting mainly of concentric lines with some flourishes. The decoration is extremely worn. The back is plain.

Length: 35 mm.

Width: 18.5 mm.

Context: Unknown

Unpublished

MEOLS No. 6

ex Potter colln

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag, comprising a circular plate with an extension terminating in a hook, whose tip is missing. The plate is pierced by the remains of two attachment holes which have been opened up by damage. The whole piece is severely decayed.

Length: 17.2 mm.

Width: 9.4 mm.

Context: Unknown

Unpublished

MEOLS No. 7

Copper-alloy hooked tag comprising a circular plate with an extension terminating in a hook, whose tip is now lost. The circular plate is decorated with seven ex Potter colln

Description:

concentric circular ridges. There appears to be a relatively wide border around the outside of the circular decoration which has now mostly been eroded away, similar to Meols No. 8. The plate is pierced by three holes. The central hole is integral to the design since it does not interrupt the pattern of the ridges and has its own plain border. The other two holes are in tandem and do interrupt the design; hence they are likely to be secondary features. The back is plain.

Length: 19 mm.

Width: 11.8 mm.

Context: Unknown

Unpublished

MEOLS No. 8

ex Potter colln

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag comprising a roughly circular plate with an extension terminating in a hook. The circular plate is decorated with six concentric circular ridges. The decoration appears complete. There is a wide, plain border around the decoration which was not trimmed carefully when the tag was cast; it is even possible that this border was meant to have been removed, leaving the decorated part of the plate as the completed object. The plate is pierced by three attachment holes, of which only the central one is integral to the design and has its own plain border. The other holes, as on Meols No. 7, are likely to be secondary features since they interrupt the design.

Length: 19.4 mm.

Width: 12.3 mm.

Context: Unknown

Unpublished

CHESTER/GREYFRIARS COURT NGR: SJ402661
Excavations Section CHE/GFC76-8 I (257) sf403

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag consisting of a triangular plate with engraved decoration and two attachment holes. The plate has five indentations in its upper or shorter edge. There is an extension to a complete hook. The plate is decorated with a

single engraved border. Punched dots in four vertical lines converge at the point where the extension to the hook begins. The back is plain.

Length: 30.5 mm.

Width: 14 mm.

Context: Residual: 'Medieval friary' (P. Carrington, pers. comm.)

Publication: Thacker, 1987, 287.

CHESTER/HUNTER STREET SCHOOL NGR: SJ403664

Excavations Section CHE/HSS1981, VI, (362) sf1083

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag comprising a triangular plate with two attachment holed and an extension to an upturned hook. The upper edge of the plate appears to have the damaged remains of indentations. There are three light hatch marks at the base of the plate on the side towards which the hook turns; the opposite face is plain.

Length: 20.5 mm.

Width: 9.5 mm.

Context: 'Soil build-up dated to the late Anglo-Saxon/Pre-Conquest period through to late medieval' (P. Carrington, pers. comm.).

Publication: Thacker, 1987, 288.

CHESTER/GREYFRIARS COURT NGR: SJ402661

Excavations Section CHE/GFC76-8 I (139) sf80

Description:

Lead-alloy plate, almost certainly from a hooked tag. At one corner the plate is bent double and the whole is considerably corroded. The hook is missing. The plate is pierced by two holes, one of which has been bisected by damage to the corner. There is no decoration.

Length: 21 mm.

Width: 13 mm.

Context: Residual: 'From a church demolition layer dated to the Reformation' (P. Carrington, pers. comm.).

Unpublished.

CHESTER/GOSS STREET NGR: SJ404663

Excavations Section CHE/GS1973 A (34) sf1212

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag, comprising a circular plate with an extension to a hook. The plate is pierced by two attachment holes. Around the edge of the plate there

is a single strand border with punched dots in a parallel line, evident on both sides. The whole piece is in an advanced state of decay and is in three fragments.

Length: 18 mm.

Width: 12.5 mm.

Context: Residual: 'Contaminated layer loosely dated to the medieval period (P. Carrington, pers. comm.).

Publication: Thacker, 1987, 287.

CHESTER/OLD MARKET HALL NGR: SJ404664

Excavations Section CHE/OMH1967-9 phase V DIW DAM sf1047

Description:

Copper-alloy hooked tag consisting of a circular plate with two projecting lugs for the attachment holes and an extension to the hook which itself is now missing. There are some traces of raised decoration in the form of punched dots around the circumference and across the neck of the extension to the hook. The extension is differentiated from the plate by a small plain collar.

Length: 26 mm.

Width: 20.6 mm.

Context: 'From a 10th-century layer with some contamination' (P. Carrington, pers. comm.).

Unpublished.

DISCUSSION

Distribution:

Hooked tags are common finds in Anglo-Saxon contexts. Published examples include silver tags from the Saxon Monastery at Whitby (Peers and Radford, 1942, 10 fig. 12), Tetney, Lincs (Wilson, 1964a, 64 & 178), The Cathedral Green, Winchester (Wilson, 1964b, 262-4; Dickinson, 1973; 117, *Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming), East Kent and Canterbury (Graham-Campbell, 1982, 144-8).

Silver hooked tags are less common than copper-alloy hooked tags such as those from Whittington Court, Glos. (Dunning 1952, 79), Silchester, Hants. (Boon, 1959, 83), Shakenoak, Oxon., Burwell and Shudy Comps, Cambs. (Dickinson, 1973, 116-7), Cirencester, Glos. (Brown, in McWhirr (ed.), 1976, 26-8) and Portchester Castle, Hants. (Hinton & Welch, in Cunliffe. (ed.), 1976, 214-6).

The distribution of hooked tags is not confined to England. There is a silver example from a Viking grave at Birka, Uppland, Sweden (Graham-Campbell 1982, 146) and two from the Forum Hoard, Rome (Graham-Campbell, forthcoming). A broken copper-alloy hooked tag was excavated from Fishamble Street III, Dublin (P. F. Wallace, pers. comm.).

An aspect of recent archaeological activity in England which has produced finds of hooked tags (alas detached from their contexts) is metal-detecting. In particular a fine collection including both silver and copper-alloy examples has come to light in Lindsey, Lincs. (K. Leahy, pers. comm.).

Recent urban excavation has provided much information on hooked tags. The excavations at York by the York Archaeological Trust, at Winchester by the Winchester Excavations Committee and at Lincoln by the City of Lincoln Archaeological Unit have all produced several examples. Many were found in stratified contexts which have a reliable date. It must be stressed that the date of a context must represent a *terminus ante quem* for the period of use of an object found within it, although some contexts will be contemporary with the manufacture of the object. The information which can be gained from stratified contexts can therefore give a vital impression of the date of particular variations of hooked tag and is useful with which to compare the Cheshire group.

Date:

Highly decorated silver hooked tags such as the Winchester pair (Wilson, 1964b, 262-4), the Birka example (Graham-Campbell, 1982, 146-7) and tags from East Kent and Canterbury (Graham-Campbell, 1982, 144-8) have characteristic motifs attributable to the Trehiddle Style of 9th-century Anglo-Saxon art. An undecorated pair of silver hooked tags from Tetney, Lincs were deposited within a coin hoard in 963 (Wilson 1964a, 64 & 178). The silver pair from the Forum Hoard, Rome, are dated by association with either of two popes of the late 9th or 10th century and by association with 10th-century coins (Graham-Campbell, forthcoming). Consequently from an art-historical perspective, from the information provided by grave contexts and association with coins, it is impossible to assign these silver hooked tags a date outside the 9th or 10th centuries.

Copper-alloy hooked tags are not only more numerous than silver ones but appear, as a group, to be more longlived. The earliest dates for copper-alloy hooked tags are those of the 7th century (Dickinson, 1973, 116-7). The majority of stratified copper and lead-alloy tags in York, Lincoln and Winchester are in 10th/11th-century contexts, many of which have been refined further. Although some copper-alloy hooked tags of Anglo-Saxon type have been found in later contexts, such as Winchester 1420-3 and 1428 (*Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming), the numerical weight of the evidence of stratified hooked tags shows them to be a pre-12th century type.

Function:

The function of hooked tags has been discussed by D. M. Wilson (1964a, 64), T. M. Dickinson (1973, 116-7) and by J. A. Graham-Campbell (1982, 145-8). Wilson's supposition that such tags 'formed the terminals of a strap or ribbon' has been made less acceptable as a generalization by the discovery of five examples

in association at Shakenoak Site F, Oxon. (Dickinson, 1973, 116), which were interpreted as 'hooks and eyes' in a multiple fastening. It was pointed out by Dickinson (1973, 117) that the hooks and attachment holes are in most cases extremely fragile and would not stand very much strain unless combined with other hooked tags. D. A. Hinton (*Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming) suggests that the tags were probably attached by sewing and that the curvilinear or indented upper edges (such as those on Meols No. 1, Chester/Greyfriars Court sf403 and Chester/Hunter Street School sf1083) would have helped to hold the thread in place. The appellation 'lace tag' (Dickinson, 1973, 116) is less apt, therefore, than simply 'hooked tag'.

The pair of hooked tags from Anglo-Saxon grave 67 at the Cathedral Green, Winchester (Wilson 1964b 262-4; Dickinson 1973, 117; *Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming) which was found beneath the knees of the skeleton has led to the suggestion that they were used as garter-hooks. Dickinson, (1973, 117) discussed two others, one from an Anglo-Saxon grave at Burwell, Cambs. and one from an Anglo-Saxon grave at Shudy Camps, Cambs. The former was found under the skull of the skeleton and the latter by the left hip. A single example from the Anglo-Saxon cemetery at St. Albans Abbey (Biddle & Kjølbye-Biddle, 1981, 23 fig. 18) was found in the pelvic region of a skeleton.

The differing positions of the hooked tags in these graves suggest that the tags had general use and were not restricted to one part of contemporary apparel. The Tetney pair (Wilson 1964a, 64) and the Rome Forum Hoard pair (Graham-Campbell, forthcoming), which were found in association with coins have been interpreted as purse-fasteners (Graham-Campbell, forthcoming).

Form:

Anglo-Saxon hooked tags fall into two broad categories; those with triangular plates and the circular plated variety. These differences seem to affect neither their date nor their function. The hook may turn towards or away from the decorated side of the plate.

Manufacture:

The only reliable evidence for the manufacture of copper-alloy hooked tags comes from Lincoln, principally from the contexts of the mid to late 11th century (Roesdahl et al, 1981, 101, G3 & G4; J. Mann, pers. comm.). At Flaxengate, fragments of thin sheet copper-alloy of a similar size to complete tags from Flaxengate, Broadgate East, Danes Terrace and St. Paul-in-the-Bail appear to be unfinished examples of both triangular and circular plated hooked tags. There are at least thirty triangular and five circular plates in an unfinished state from Flaxengate and one from West Parade (J. Mann, pers. comm.).

The Cheshire Group:

The Cheshire group of hooked tags vary in shape but fall into the two broad categories of having either triangular or circular plates. In some cases there are projecting lugs for the attachment holes, and some of the attachment holes seem to be secondary features. Decoration is of a simple type, punched or tracer-punched, except for Meols No. 4 which has an inlaid design.

Meols No. 1 is among the more elaborate copper-alloy hooked tags. It is similar in shape and size to Chester/Greyfriars Court sf403 and both have indented upper edges. Several parallels exist. A hooked tag from Coppergate, York (Hall 1981, fig. 121b) is of similar shape and size and is decorated with punched ring-and-dot motifs. It also has an indented upper edge. A copper-alloy tag from Winchester, 1416 (*Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming) which is also comparable, is decorated with random punched dots and was found in an early 12th-century stratified context. Chester/Hunter Street School sf1083 and Chester/Greyfriars Court sf80 are examples of the more elongated triangular hooked tag which is a very common variation. Recently excavated parallels include Winchester 1408-11, 1413-5 and 1417 which have securely stratified contexts. The contexts are dated to between the mid 10th century and early 12th century. The closest parallel to Chester/Hunter Street School sf1083 is Winchester 1411 which is from a late 10th-century reconstruction of the Old Minster (*Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming).

Of less elongated triangular hooked tags, two copper alloy examples from Cirencester, Nos. 18 and 20 (Brown in McWhirr (ed), 1976, 26-7) are decorated with a tracer-punched pattern around the edge of the plate and in a central axis, providing close parallels for Meols No. 2.

Amongst the circular-plated hooked tags in the Cheshire group, two (Meols Nos. 7 and 8) are decorated with a cast concentric circular design. They are paralleled very closely by an example from Bardney, Lincs. (K. Leahy, pers. comm.), and by the St. Albans tag (Biddle and Kjølbye-Biddle, 1981, 23 fig. 18) which differs only in that it has projecting lugs for the attachment holes. The circular motif is present on a copper-alloy tag from Lower Brook Street, Winchester (1424, *Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming) which is from a context of the late 11th/early 12th centuries. There are two plain examples from the Cathedral Green and Brook Street, Winchester (1426 & 1427, *Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming) which are comparable to Meols No. 6 and Chester/Goss Street sf1212 and are from contexts of, respectively, 1110 and the late 11th century.

Meols Nos. 4 and 5 have projecting lugs for the attachment holes. The inlaid decoration on No. 4 is damaged but the form of the tag is almost exactly paralleled by Winchester 1425 from a context dated to the mid 11th century (*Winchester Studies*, 7, ii, forthcoming). No. 5 is the largest hooked tag from Meols. What remains of the decoration on the plate can be discerned as a division dividing the surface into three fields, in a similar fashion to the designs

on the silver hooked tags from East Kent and Canterbury (Graham-Campbell, 1982, 145).

The comparative material briefly surveyed above suggests that the Cheshire group of hooked tags is Anglo-Saxon in provenance, dating from the 10th to early 12th centuries. The variation in form appears to exclude common manufacturing origins: rather it suggests importation from a number of diverse locations. There is no evidence for manufacture at Chester or Meols in the form of unfinished plates.

From the early 10th century onwards Chester, Meols and the Dee Estuary grew in economic importance following the foundation of the burh and mint of Chester (Bu'Lock, 1972, 62). If the hooked tags did not count as merchandise themselves or even as by-products of trading activity, they remain evidence for long-distance contact with southern and eastern England.

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