

REPORT ON A PUFF-BALL FROM ROMAN MANCETTER

By Allan Hall, 4/8/86

An object from the Roman well at Mancetter, Warks. (sample 17/23 L.54) was sent for identification by Ms Kay Hartley in July 1986. Having previously been thought to be leather. It was subsequently suggested that it might be a puff-ball fungus.

The object was a flattened leathery structure having the texture and superficial appearance of fine leather. It appeared to be the outer skin of approximately two-thirds of a solid or hollow structure that had originally been roughly spherical in shape. At the time of examination its maximum dimension was 85 mm.

Inside the smooth leathery outer skin the characteristic components of a puff-ball spore-mass were visible - fine branching capillitium threads mixed with smooth-walled spores of about 5 mm diameter on short stalks (pedicels) of 1-2 mm in length. These characters agree reasonably well with Watling and Seaward's (1976) description of Calvatia utriformis (Bull. ex Pers.) Jaap from Vindolanda, though in the absence of adequate reference material, the identification must remain tentative, viz. cf. Calvatia utriformis. The specimen is certainly not Bovista nigrescens Pers. ex Pers. or Langermannia (= Lycoperdon = Lasiosphaera) gigantea (Batsch. ex Pers.) Rostk., two other fungi recorded from archaeological deposits (ibid. and Hall, unpublished).

Watling and Seaward discuss the significance of finds of these puff-ball fruiting bodies, which are generally thought to have been used for staunching wounds and/or as tinder, and the present find warrants no further comment.

Reference

Watling, R. and Seaward,
M.R.D. (1976).

Some observations on puff-balls from British archaeological sites. Journal of archaeological Science 3, 165-72.